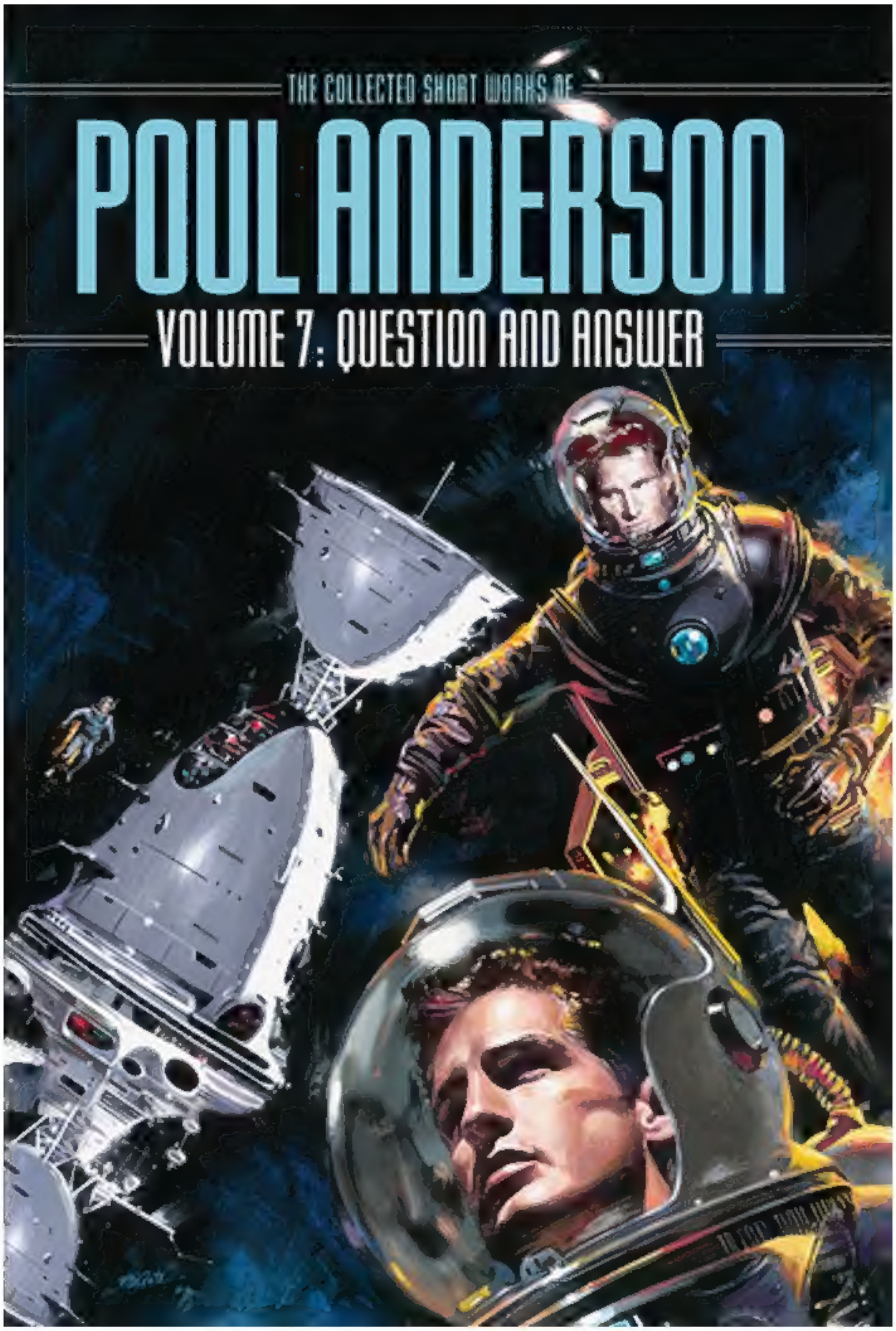
THE COLLECTED SHORT WORKS OF

POUL ANDERSON

VOLUME 7: QUESTION AND ANSWER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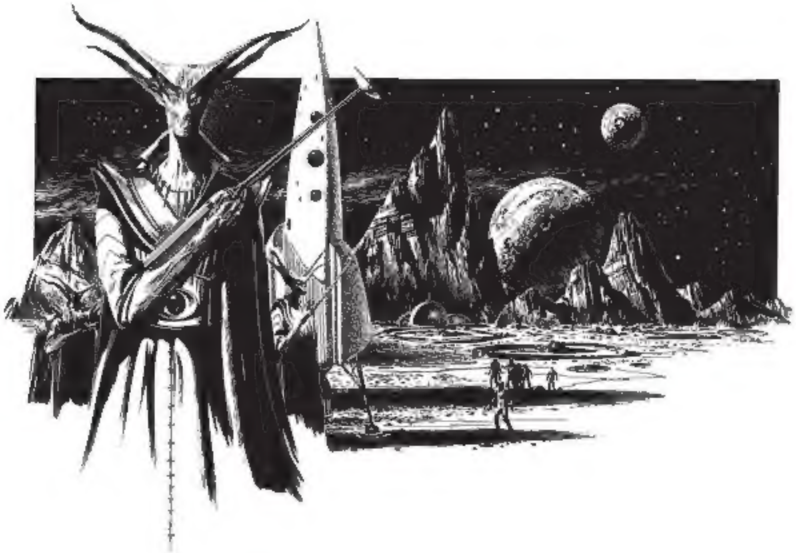

Question and Answer

Volume Seven

The Collected Short Works of Poul Anderson

Edited by Rick Katze and Mike Kerpan

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

This is volume 7 in a series collecting Poul Anderson's short fiction.

Dominic Flandry is well-represented in this volume. The short stories, "Honorable Enemies", which is the first appearance of Aycharaych of Chereion, "Warriors from Nowhere" and "Tiger by the Tail", appeared in the pulps in the early 1950's. The short novels, "Message in Secret" and "Hunters of the Sky Cave" were first published in 1959. While the Long Night is referenced in most Flandry stories, I find some of the earlier Flandry to be more enjoyable to read which is why I chose these stories.

David Falkyn is represented by "Trader Team" which has a poker-playing computer, a dragon, and a feline.

"The Big Rain" gives us another look at the UnMan character. This is the 3rd volume with an UnMan character, each written with a slightly different perspective.

With the exception of "In the Shadow", all the stories fit into Anderson's future history. Yet they appeared in various magazines as stand-alone stories and can be enjoyed for what they were intended to be.

"The Troublemakers" looks at life on an interstellar spaceship which will take generations to reach a new home.

When I first began, I expected the series to include about 1 million words. As the 4rth volume was being finished, I found that I still had a huge amount of material from which to create the 5th and then the 6th volume. As this introduction is being written, I no longer have any material which would form the basis for creating an 8th volume. 7 Volumes, which will contain around 1.75 million words is a testament to the writing skills of Poul Anderson. It is amazing how consistent the quality of stories has been from his first story and continuing throughout his career. An 8th volume is unlikely for the foreseeable future.

This volume has a wonderful original cover illustration by Vincent Di Fate as well as a two page frontispiece.

While there is a section at the end of this volume where the many people who helped make this volume exist, looking at the series as a whole, a special thanks is sent to Dave Anderson, George Flynn, David G. Grubbs, Mike Kerpan, Alice Lewis, Tony Lewis, Mark Olson, Sharon Sbarsky, NESFAns all.

These collections would never have happened except for a chance meeting at a Worldcon when I was talking with Greg and Astrid Bear, and Karen Anderson, about publishing a volume of Poul Anderson stories. It took awhile to get going. Karen and Astrid provided crucial support adding tidbits to the history of some of these stories.

Then there is Chris Lotts, the agent for the Anderson estate, who worked with me to create the framework to make the project a reality.

Tony Weiskopf, of Baen Books, was also quite helpful. Baen Books had the rights to certain stories and made them available as needed for the various volumes. For those who also like to see collections of Poul

Anderson by series, I strongly recommend you look at the Baen collections. I chose a different way to portray Anderson's career.

Finally, there are the editors who bought the stories originally. Many of the magazines in which these stories first appeared no longer exist. Without them I would have had nothing with which to work

Rick Katze
Framingham, MA
December 2016

POUL ANDERSON

Who am I to write this introduction to a collection of stories by one of the greatest authors in the science fiction and fantasy universe? I may know my way around the literature of science fiction, but I am not, nor will I ever be, mistaken for a literary scholar. Certainly I've worked in the field long enough and I did know Poul Anderson, but the truth is that I *barely* knew him. We'd met perhaps a dozen times over the years, up at the offices of *Analog* and, more often, we spent a considerable amount of time attending the same conventions. But I was in utter awe of him—so much so that I would get tongue-tied in his presence, to the extent that the very thought of carrying on a conversation with him seemed quite beyond me.

The first time I met him was in the Graybar Building in New York City, just behind Grand Central Station on Lexington Avenue. *Analog* was owned by Condé Nast in those days and John W. Campbell, Jr. occupied an office with his editorial assistant, Kay Tarrant, that was, if memory serves, on the 11th floor of that building. Although I'd been an avid reader of the magazine since my teens, as an artist I was brand new to *Analog* and was admiring of just about everyone who walked through the door of Campbell's office. To me they were like Homeric gods, far larger than life and infinitely smarter than myself. It was early winter of 1969 and on that particular day I'd arrived at the office at about 10:30 AM to drop off a drawing, unaware that Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson were scheduled to meet Campbell for lunch. Campbell told me of the appointment as we sat down to discuss my work, and he made a point of telling me that Anderson was his very favorite author. "A genius," I believe are the words that Campbell used to describe him, as if my usual "fan boy" infatuation with science fiction writers were not enough to induce my discomfort. Campbell did not bandy about such words lightly. And so, I muttered something when they arrived and Campbell introduced me, made my excuses and quickly rushed out the door. I remember brooding and mentally kicking myself on the train ride home for having lacked the social skills to carry on even the simplest of conversations.

That kind of set the tenor for me from that point on when I was in Poul's presence. Gordy Dickson and I managed to establish a relationship of sorts over time, but Poul remained always aloof and unapproachable. It was mostly me, I thought, and the looming intimidation that I felt for his legendary stature in the field, but I learned later that Poul's hearing was impaired from a childhood illness and this sometimes contributed to his reluctance to engage. I was, after all, still very much a stranger to him, even after decades of working in the field. Had Poul's hearing not been a factor, still I would have found a basis for conversation difficult to come by. After all, he was a physics major in college and I'd gone to art school. Yet, over the years since his death, as I've continued to read and re-read his stories and essays, I've learned more and more of the many interests we had in common.

This exercise in avoidance continued for more than three decades until the weekend of September 8th, 2000 when we found ourselves co-guests of honor at the 20th *Coppercon*, a science fiction convention in Scottsdale, Arizona. At the end of the opening ceremony, Poul leaned over to me, reached out to shake my hand and said, "It's been a hell of a collaboration all these years, hasn't it." Until that very moment I hadn't realized that I'd been steadily illustrating his stories and books for all that time—30-odd years and more than 30 cover paintings. And, yes, our work had been at times a perfect fit. That broke the ice and thereafter I was able to converse with the great Poul Anderson, towering genius and SF and fantasy author extraordinaire, as if he were a mere mortal like myself. He turned out to be quite friendly and down to earth, if you'll pardon my using those particular words.

I also learned a very interesting thing from him about another of my heroes, the magnificent astronomical artist Chesley Bonestell. In the late 1960s, Poul and his wife Karen went to visit Bonestell at his home in Berkeley, just across the bay from where the Andersons lived in San Francisco. Bonestell was in the midst of working on a mural, a view of the Milky Way Galaxy as seen from a point in deep space, for the Boston Museum of Science's Charles Hayden Planetarium. The main section of the mural was being painted on a large canvas stretched diagonally on a clothesline across Bonestell's living room, while the end sections of the 10'x20' painting were being worked on downstairs in the artist's studio. Once completed, the intention was that the pieces would be seamed together and in-painted after the mural was shipped to Boston and mounted in place. That installation was completed in 1968, replacing a magnificent but inaccurate mural, also by Bonestell, of the earth as seen from the surface of the moon. The original painting had been on exhibition for more than a dozen years, until the flight of Apollo 11 (the first manned mission to land on the moon) prompted the painting's removal. The jagged cliffs of Bonestell's original mural, though evocative and strikingly dramatic, did not match the now familiar reality of the gray, lumpy lunar terrain. Because there are no set rules as to how and where a mural can be painted

—some are painted at the venue, directly on the walls where they are to be seen—it's interesting to learn this fascinating bit of detail about how both of the Hayden Planetarium paintings were created. The earlier version, twice the length of its replacement, is one of Bonestell's most interesting and controversial works and what remains of it after its removal from the wall resides in the collection of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., where it has sat for several decades awaiting restoration.

Of Poul's own work, it is no secret that he received many accolades over a career that began in the late 1940s and was the deserving recipient of some seven Hugos and three Nebula Awards; was named a Gandalf Grand Master of Fantasy in 1978 by the World Science Fiction Society, became a Grand Master of the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1998, and was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2000.

If there had been none of these acknowledgements of his talent, he would still be remembered for his canny ability to create credible and often tragic heroes and noble, stalwart villains who had to make the hard choices—in the outward expansion into space; see to the preservation of the home world, wherever and whatever it may be; and make their way through the convoluted corridors of time and of alternate histories. Having read of their exploits, who could forget the cunning capitalist Nicholas van Rijn, the valiant Dominic Flandry of the Imperial Intelligence Corps, or the ruthless telepathic superspy, Aycharaych? If you are holding this volume in your hands right now, these characters and others, with their many nuanced shades of gray, will not be strangers to you.

Although *Question and Answer* is intended as the final volume in NESFA's series of Poul Anderson story collections, having read its contents in advance I can assure you that, being the last, it is far from being the dregs of Anderson's literary output. The editors of this glorious edition have provided a rich and delightful feast for the science fictioneer who prefers his/her stories real, who sees the exploration and conquest of space as a necessary step in the survival of our species, who can tolerate a rare failure for the Noble Cause, and who loves the occasional fantasy as much as she/he loves science fiction.

So, after knowing each other for more than 30 years, we finally met—really met—for the first time in Scottsdale in September of 2000. Too late, I'm afraid. Ten months later, Poul Anderson would be taken from us, the victim of cancer, and with that went any chance that he and I would ever get to know each other any better. Who am I to write of him? No one in particular, just an avid fan of his work, and someone who might be considered, in the broadest interpretation of the term, a colleague. What I do know is that, without question, our field is much better and richer for his having been a part of it. He was, and will remain, a giant in the realm of fantastic fiction, having provided visions of a future that challenges our ingenuity and our humanity, but one in which Humankind remains very much a part—true citizens of the universe. Having given us so much, we will continue to sing his praises and argue his philosophies for generations to come. To live forever through one's work—what more could one ask of a life well lived?

Vincent Di Fate

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard. The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good.

Ecclesiastes, ix, 16-18

-1-

Somewhere a relay clicked, and somewhere else a robot muttered to itself. Alarm lights shot through the spectrum to a hot and angry red, flashing and flashing, and a siren began its idiotic hoot.

"Get *out* of here!"

Three of the techs dropped what they were doing and shoved for a purchase against the nearest wall. The control panel was a yammer of crimson. Their weightless bodies slammed through the siren-raddled air toward the door.

"Come back here, you—!" They were gone before Kemal Gummus-lugil's roar was finished. He spat after them and grabbed a hand ring and pushed himself toward the panel.

Radiation, radiation, radiation, screamed the siren. Radiation enough to blaze through all shielding and come out with a fury that ionized the engine-room air and turned the alarm system crazy. But the effects were cumulative—Gummus-lugil got close enough to the meters to read them. The intensity was mounting, but he could stand half an hour of it without danger.

Why had they saddled him with a bunch of thumb-fingered morons so superstitious about gamma rays that they fled when the converter gave them a hard look?

He extended his arms before him, stopping his free-fall speed with fingertips and triceps. Reaching out for the manual cut-off, he slapped it down with a clank. Somehow the automatic safeties had failed to operate, and the nuclear fires in the converter were turning it into a small sun—but hell, a man could still stop the thing!

Other relays went to work. Baffle plates shot home, cutting off the fuel supply. The converter's power output was shunted to the generators, building up the damper fields which should stop the reaction—

And didn't!

It took seconds for Gummus-lugil to realize that fact. Around him, within him, the air was full of death; to an eye sensitive in the hard frequencies, his lungs must have glowed; but now the intensity should be dropping, the nuclei slowed in fighting the damper field till their speed dropped below resonance, and he could stop to find out what was wrong. He pulled his way along the giant panel toward the meters for the automatic safeties, and felt sweat prickling under his arms.

He and his crew had been testing the newly installed converter, nothing more. Something could have been wrong with one or another of the parts; but the immense complex of interlocking controls which was the engine's governor should have been self-regulating, foolproof, and—

The siren began hooting still louder.

Gummus-lugil felt his whole body grow wet. The fuel supply had been cut off, yes, but the reaction hadn’t been stopped. No damper fields! Behind the casing, all the fires of hell were burning themselves out. It would take hours before that was done, and everybody who stayed on the ship would be a dead man.

For an instant he hung there, aware of the endless falling sensation of weightlessness, aware of the noise and the vicious red lights. If they abandoned the ship in her orbit, she would be hot for days to come and the converter would be ruined. He had to flush the thing—now!

Behind him, the shielded bulkheads closed, and the ventilation system stopped its steady whirr. The ship’s robomonitors would not let poison spread too swiftly through her entire body. They, at least, were still functioning. But they didn’t care about him and radiation was eating at his flesh.

He bit his teeth together and got to work. The emergency manuals still seemed O.K. He spoke into his throat mike: “Gummus-lugil to bridge. I’m going to flush this thing. That means the outside hull will be hot for a few hours. Anybody out there?”

“No.” The supervisor’s voice sounded small and scared. “We’re all standing by the lifeboat locks. Don’t you think we should just abandon ship and let her burn herself out?”

“And ruin a billion solars’ worth of engine? No, thanks! Just stay where you are, you’ll be O.K.” Even in this moment, the engineer snorted. He began turning the main flushing wheel, bracing his feet against his body’s tendency to rotate the other way.

The auxiliaries were purely mechanical and hydraulic—for which praises be the designers, now when all electronic equipment seemed to have gone mad. Gummus-lugil grunted, feeling the effort in his muscles. A series of ports opened. The rage of more-than-incandescent gases spilled out into space, a brief flame against darkness and then nothing the human eye could see.

Slowly, the red lights dulled to yellow and the siren moderated its voice. The radioactivity in the engine room was falling off already. Gummus-lugil decided that he'd not had a harmful dose, though the doctors would probably order him a couple of months off the job.

He went through the special safety exit; in the chamber beyond, he shucked his clothes and gave them to the robot. Beyond that, there were three successive decontamination rooms; it took half an hour before a Geiger proclaimed him fit for human society. He slipped on the coverall which another robot handed him and made his way to the bridge.

The supervisor shrank from him, just a trifle, as he entered. "All right," said Gummus-lugil sarcastically. "I know I'm a little radioactive yet. I know I should go ringing a bell and crying, 'Unclean! Unclean!' But right now I want to make a call to Earth."

"Huh…oh, yes, yes. Of course." The supervisor scurried through the air toward the com-desk. "Where to?"

"Lagrange Institute head office."

"What…went wrong? Do you know?"

"Everything. More than could possibly happen by chance. If I hadn't been the only man aboard with the brains of an oyster, the ship would've been abandoned and the converter ruined."

"You don't mean—"

Gummus-lugil raised his fingers and ticked them off one by one: “S, A, B, O, T, A, G, E spells ‘sabotage.’ And I want to get the one who did it.”

-2-

John Lorenzen was looking out of his hotel window when the call came. He was on the fifty-eighth floor, and the sheer drop down made him feel a little dizzy. They didn’t build that high on Luna.

Below him, above him, around him, the city was like a jungle, airy flex-bridges looping from one slim tower to the next; and it glowed and burned with light, further out than he could see, over the curve of the world. The white and gold and red and royal blue illumination wasn’t continuous; here and there a wide patch of black showed a park, with a fountain of fire or glowing water in the middle of its night; but the lights reached for many kilometers. Quito never slept.

It was near midnight, when a lot of rockets would be taking off. Lorenzen wanted to see the sight; it was famous in the Solar System. He had paid double price for a room facing the wall of the spaceport: not without twinges of conscience, for the Lagrange Institute was footing the bills, but he’d done it. A boyhood on a remote Alaskan farm, a long grind through college—the poor student going through on scholarships and assistantships—and then the years at Luna Observatory, hadn’t held anything like this. He wasn’t complaining about his life, but it hadn’t been anything very spectacular either, and if now he was to go into the great darkness beyond the sun, he ought to see Quito Spaceport at midnight first. He might not have another chance.

The phone chimed gently. He started, swearing at his own nervousness. There wasn’t anything to be scared of. They wouldn’t bite him. But the palms of his hands were wet.

He stepped over and thumbed the switch. “Hello,” he said.

A face grew in the screen. It wasn’t a particularly memorable face—smooth, plump, snub-nosed, thin gray hair—and the body seemed short and stout. The voice was rather high but not unpleasant, speaking in North American English: “Dr. Lorenzen?”

“Yes. Who…is this, please?” In Lunopolis, everybody knew everybody else, and trips to Leyport and Ciudad Libre had been rare. Lorenzen wasn’t used to this welter of strangers.

And he wasn’t used to Earth gravity or changeable weather or the thin cool air of Ecuador. He felt lost.

“Avery. Edward Avery. I’m with the government, but also with the Lagrange Institute—sort of liaison man between the two, and I’ll be going along on the expedition as psychomed. Hope I didn’t get you out of bed?”

“No…no, not at all. I’m used to irregular hours. You get that way on Luna.”

“And in Quito too—believe me.” Avery grinned. “Look, could you come over and see me?”

“I…well…now?”

“As good a time as any, if you aren’t busy. We can have a few drinks, maybe, and talk a little. I was supposed to approach you anyway, while you were in town.”

“Well…well, yes, sure, I suppose so.” Lorenzen felt rushed off his feet. After the leisurely years on the Moon, he couldn’t adapt to this pace they had on Earth. He wanted to spit in somebody’s eye and tell him they’d go at his, Lorenzen’s, speed for a change; but he knew he never would.

“Good, fine. Thanks a lot.” Avery gave him the address and switched off.

A low rumble murmured through the room. The rockets! Lorenzen hurried back to the window and saw the shielding wall like the edge of the world, black against their light. One, two, three, a dozen metal spears rushing upward on flame and thunder, and the Moon a cool shield high above the city—yes, it was worth seeing.

He dialed for an aircab and slipped a cloak over his thin lounging pajamas. The ’copter appeared in minutes, hovering just beyond his balcony and extending a gangway. He walked in, feeling his cloak grow warm as it sucked power from the ’cast system, and sat down and punched out the address he wanted.

“Dos solarios y cincuenta centos, por favor.”

The mechanical voice made him feel embarrassed, he barely stopped himself from apologizing as he put a tenner in the slot. The autopilot gave him his change as the cab swung into the sky.

He was let off at another hotel—apparently Avery didn’t live permanently in Quito either—and made his way down the hall to the suite named. “Lorenzen,” he said to the door, and it opened for him. He walked into an anteroom, giving his cloak to the robot, and was met by Avery himself.

Yes, the psychman was pretty short. Lorenzen looked down from his own gaunt height as he shook hands. He was only about half Avery’s age, he guessed—a tall skinny young man who didn’t quite know where to put his feet, unkempt brown hair, gray eyes, blunt homely features with the smooth even tan of Lunar sun-type fluoros.

"Very glad you could come, Dr. Lorenzen." Avery looked guilty and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Afraid I can't offer you that drink right now. We've got another expedition man here…came over on business…a Martian, you know—"

"Huh?" Lorenzen caught himself just in time. He didn't know if he'd like having a Martian for crewmate, but it was too late now.

They entered the living room. The third man was already seated, and did not rise for them. He was also tall and lean, but with a harshness to his outlines that the tight black clothes of a Noachian Dissenter did not help; his face was all angles, jutting nose and chin, hard black eyes under the close-cropped dark hair.

"Joab Thornton—John Lorenzen—please sit down." Avery lowered himself into a chair. Thornton sat stiffly on the edge of his, obviously disliking the idea of furniture which molded itself to his contours.

"Dr. Thornton is a physicist—radiation and optics—at the University of New Zion," explained Avery. "Dr. Lorenzen is with the observatory at Lunopolis. Both you gentlemen will be going to Lagrange with us, of course. You might as well get acquainted now." He tried to smile.

"Thornton…haven't I heard your name in connection with X-ray photography?" asked Lorenzen. "We've used some of your results to examine the hard spectra of stars, I believe. Very valuable."

"Thank you." The Martian's lips creased upward. "The credit is not to me but to the Lord." There didn't seem to be any answer for that.

"Excuse me." He turned to Avery. "I want to get this over with, and they said you were the expedition's official wailing wall. I've just been looking over the personnel list and checking up on the records. You have one engineer down by the name of Reuben Young. His religion—if you can call it that—is New Christian."

"Um-m-m...yes—" Avery dropped his eyes. "I know your sect doesn't get along with his, but—"

"Doesn't get along!" A vein pulsed in Thornton's temple. "The New Christians forced us to migrate to Mars when they were in power. It was they who perverted doctrine till all Reformism was a stink in the nostrils of the people. It was they who engineered our war with Venus." *(Not so,* thought Lorenzen, *part of it had been power rivalry, part of it the work of Terrestrial psychmen who wanted their masters to play Kilkenny cat.)* It is still they who slander us to the rest of the Solar system. It is their fanatics who make it necessary for me to carry a gun here on Earth." He gulped and clenched his fists. When he spoke again, it was quietly:

"I am not an intolerant man. Only the Almighty knows the just from the unjust. You can have as many Jews, Catholics, Moslems, Unbelievers, Collectivists, Sebastianists, and I know not what else along as you choose. But by joining the expedition I take on myself an obligation: to work with, and perhaps to fight with and save the life of, everyone else aboard. I cannot assume this obligation toward a New Christian.

"If Young goes along, I don't. That's all."

"Well...well—" Avery ran a hand through his hair, an oddly helpless gesture. "Well, I'm sorry you feel that way—"

"Those idiots in the government supposedly running our personnel office for us should have known it from the start."

"You wouldn't consider—"

"I wouldn't. You have two days to inform me that Young has been discharged; thereafter I book passage back to Mars."

Thornton got up. “I’m sorry to be so rude about it,” he finished, “but that’s the way it is. Speak to the office for me. I’d better be going now.” He shook Lorenzen’s hand. “Glad to have met you, sir. I hope the next time will be under better conditions. I’d like to ask you about some of that X-ray work.”

When he was gone, Avery sighed gustily. “How about that drink? I need one bad myself. What an off-orbit!”

“From the realistic point of view,” said Lorenzen cautiously, “he was right. There’d have been murder if those two were on the same ship.”

“I suppose so.” Avery picked up the chair mike and spoke to the RoomServ. Turning back to his guest: “How that slip-up occurred, I don’t know. But it doesn’t surprise me. There seems to be a curse on the whole project. Everything’s gone wrong. We’re a year behind our original schedule, and it’s cost almost twice the estimate.”

The RoomServ discharged a tray with two whiskies and soda; it landed on the roller table, which came over to the men. Avery picked up his glass and drank thirstily. “Young will have to go,” he said. “He’s just an engineer, plenty more where he came from; we need a physicist of Thornton’s caliber.”

“It’s strange,” said Lorenzen, “that a man so brilliant in his line—he’s a top-flight mathematician too, you know—should be a...Dissenter.”

“Not strange.” Avery sipped moodily. “The human mind is a weird and tortuous thing. It’s perfectly possible to believe in a dozen mutually contradictory things at once. Few people ever really learn how to think at all; those who do, think only with the surface of their minds, the rest is still conditioned reflex and rationalization of a thousand subconscious fears and hates and longings. We’re finally getting a science of man—a *real* science; we’re finally learning how a child must be brought up if he is to be truly sane. But it’ll take a long time before the results show on any large scale: there is so much insanity left over from all our history, so much built into the very structure of human society.”

“Well—” Lorenzen shifted uneasily. “I daresay you’re right. But, uh, about the business at hand…you wanted to see me—”

“Just for a drink and a talk,” said Avery. “It’s my business to get to know every man on the ship better than he knows himself. But that’ll also take time.”

“You have my psych tests from when I volunteered for the expedition,” said Lorenzen. His face felt hot. “Isn’t that enough?”

“No. So far, you’re only a set of scores, multi-dimensional profiles, empirical formulas and numbers. I’d like to know you as a human being, John. I’m not trying to pry. I just want to be friends.”

“All right.” Lorenzen look a long drink. “Fire away.”

“No questions. This isn’t an analysis. Just a conversation.” Avery sighed again. “I’ll be glad when we get into space! You’ve no idea what a rat race the whole business has been, right from the first. If our friend Thornton knew all the details, he’d probably conclude it wasn’t God’s will that man should go to Troas. He might be right, at that. Sometimes I wonder.”

“The first expedition got back—”

“That wasn’t the Lagrange expedition. That was a shipful of astronomers, simply investigating the stars of the Hercules cluster. They found the Troas-Ilium system in the course of studying the Lagrange suns, and took some data from space—enough to make a planetographic survey seem worth while—but they didn’t land.

“The first *real* Lagrange expedition never came back.”

There was silence in the room. Outside the broad windows the night city burned against darkness.

“And we,” said Lorenzen finally, “are the second—”

“Yes. And everything has been going wrong, I tell you. First the Institute had to spend three years raising the money. Then there were the most fantastic mix-ups in their administration. Then they started building the ship—they couldn’t just buy one, everything was committed elsewhere—and there were delays all along the line. This part wasn’t available, that part had to be made special—it ran the time of building, and the cost, way over estimate. Then—this is confidential, but you might as well know it—there was sabotage. The main converter went wild on its first test. Only the fact that one man stuck by his post saved it from being a total loss. Even as it was, the repairs and the delay exhausted the Institute’s treasury, and there was another pause while they raised more money. It wasn’t easy; public apathy toward the whole idea of colonization is growing with each failure.

“They’re almost ready now, There are still hitches—this business tonight was just a small sample—but the job is almost done.” Avery shook his head “It’s fortunate that the directors of the Institute, and Captain Hamilton, and a few others, have been so stubborn about it. Ordinary men would have given up years ago.”

“Years…yes, it’s about seven years since the first expedition disappeared, isn’t it?” asked Lorenzen.

“Uh-huh. Five years since the Institute started planning this one.”

“Who…who were the saboteurs?”

“Nobody knows. Maybe some fanatic group with its own distorted motives. There are a lot of them, you know. Or maybe…no, that’s too fantastic. I'd rather assume that Lagrange Expedition II has had a run of bad luck, and hope that the run is about over."

"And Expedition I?" asked Lorenzen softly.

"I don't know. Who does? It's one of the things we're supposed to find out."

They were quiet then for a long lime. The unspoken thought ran between them: *It looks as if somebody or something doesn't want men on Troas. But who, and why, and how?*

We're supposed to find the answer. But we're also supposed to bring the answer back. And the first expedition, as well equipped and as well manned as ours, did not return.

-3-

"...Interstellar distances have become almost meaningless with the invention of the warp drive; within an enormous range, it does not take appreciably more time and energy to go one hundred thousand lightyears than to go one. As a natural result, once the nearer stars had been visited, explorers from Sol have been investigating the most interesting ones in the galaxy, even though many of these lie very far indeed from home, and temporarily ignoring the millions of intervening, but quite ordinary, suns. In the twenty two years since the first Alpha Centauri expedition, hundreds of stars have been reached; and if the hope of finding Earth-like planets for colonization has so far been blasted, the reward in terms of scientific knowledge has been considerable.

"The first expedition to the Hercules cluster was purely astronomical, the personnel being interested only in the astrophysics of the cluster: a dense group composed of millions of stars belonging to Population II, with a surrounding space singularly clear of dust and gasses. But while circling the double star Lagrange, the observers detected a planet and investigated. It turned out to be a double planet, the larger remarkably terrestroid; from its Trojan position, it was named Troas, the smaller companion named Ilium. Lacking facilities for planetfall, the expedition necessarily contented itself with studies from space—"

Lorenzen put down the pamphlet with a sigh. Almost, he knew it by heart. Spectrographic data on the atmosphere, yes, and the vegetation observed seemed to hold chlorophyll. Calculations of mass and surface gravity. Thermocouples confirming what the maps showed: a world still in the clutch of glaciers, but the equatorial regions cool and bracing, a climate which knew snow and storm but also the flowering of summer. A world where men could perhaps walk unarmored, and build homes and farms and cities, a world where men could possibly grow roots and belong. The seven billion humans jammed into the Solar System were crying for a place to go. And during his lifetime he had seen the slow withering of the dream.

It had been foreseen, of course, but no one had believed it till one ship after another had come trailing home, the dust of stars on her battered hull, to bring the word. In all the galaxy's swarming myriads of planets, there might be none where men could strike roots.

Life on Earth is such a delicate balance of chemical, physical, and ecological factors, many of them due to sheer geological or evolutionary accident, that the probability of a world where men could live without elaborate artificial aids is lower than one dares think. First you have to find an oxygen atmosphere, the proper range of radiation and temperature, a gravity not too small to let the air escape and not so great as to throw the human body-fluid adjustment out of kilter. That alone winnows the worlds like some great machine; you have less than one per cent left. And then you have to start on the biology of it. Vegetation nourishing to man, and the domestic animals which can eat it, cannot grow without a gigantic web of other life, most of it microscopic: nitrogen-fixing bacteria, saprophytes, earthworms—and these cannot simply be seeded on a new world, for they in turn are dependent on other lifeforms. You have to give them an ecology into which they can fit. A billion years of separate evolution will most likely produce native life which is inedible or sheer poison; what, for instance, are the odds against the duplication of all the vitamins?

Mars and Venus and the Jovian moons had been colonized, yes, but it had been at enormous expense and for special reasons—mining, penal colonies, refugees during two centuries of war and tyranny; their system of domes and tank food could never support many, however hard you tried. Now when the stars were open, nobody wanted another hell-planet. In money terms—which, ultimately, means in terms of value received for effort expended—it wouldn't pay.

A few worlds which might have been colonizable—and all of them held diseases to which man had no racial immunity whatsoever, which would surely wipe out ninety per cent of any colony before serums and vaccines could be developed. (The dying crew of the *Magellan*, returning from Sirius to radio their tragic message before they plunged their ship into the sun.) Or there were natives, unhuman beings as bright as man, often with their own technologies not too far behind his. They would resist invasion, and the logistics of interstellar conquest were merely ridiculous. Balancing the cost of sending colonists and their equipment—lives, too-scarce material resources, blood, sweat, and tears—and the cost, of sending soldiers, against the probable gain—a few million humans given land, and the economics of space travel such that they could ship little of value back to Sol—yielded a figure too far in the red. Conquest was theoretically possible, but a war-exhausted humanity, most of it still living near the starvation level, wasn't that interested in empire.

Wanted: Terrestroid planets, habitable but uninhabited, clean of major sicknesses, rich enough to support colonists without help from Sol.

Found: In almost a generation, nothing.

Lorenzen remembered the wave of excitement which had followed the return of the Hercules expedition. He had still been a boy then—that was the year before he got the scholarship to Rio Polytechnic—but he, too, had looked up, through a wintry Alaskan night to the cold arrogance of the stars; he had also flung his head back with a laugh.

And the *Da Gama* had set out and had left Sol behind her. And after two years, men shrugged with a weariness that was dying hope. Murdered by natives or by microbes, gulped down when the earth opened under them, frozen by a sudden blast from the glacial north—who knew? Who cared? You heard little talk nowadays about New Earth; no Utopian schemes for the fresh start man was going to make were being published; more and more, men put their shoulders to the tired old wheel of Earth, resigned to this being their only home and their only hope through all time forever.

"Two swallows do not make a summer....Statistically inadequate sample...Statistical certainty that *somewhere* there must be—" But funds for more investigations were whittled down in every session of Parliament. More and more of the great star ships swung darkly about Earth while their captains begged for finances. And when the Lagrange Institute dug into its own treasury to buy one of them, it could not be done, there was always a reason. "Sorry, but we want to keep her; as soon as we can raise the money, we want to try an idea of our own...Sorry, but she's already committed; leaving in two months for a xenological expedition to Tau Ceti...

Sorry, but we're converting her to an interplanetary freighter, that's where the money is…Sorry." The *Henry Hudson* had to be built from scratch.

The Egyptians sailed to Punt, and could easily have gone further; with a little development, their ships could have reached the Indies. The Alexandrians built an aeolipile, but there was enough slave labor around so that they had no reason to go on from there and make a steam turbine. The Romans printed their maps, but didn't apply the idea to books. The Arabs developed algebra and then got more interested in theological hairsplitting. Something has always lain within the grasp of man which he just didn't care to take hold of. Society must want something enough for the wish to become an actual need before it gets the thing.

The starward wish was dying.

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Sol was two billion kilometers behind them, little more than the brightest star in a frosty swarm, when they went into warp. The engines roared, building up toward the potentials beyond which the omega effect set in; there was a wrenching dizziness as the ship and her crew leaped out of normal energy levels; night and confusion while the atoms readjusted in their non-Dirac matrices; and then quiet, and utter blind blackness outside the viewports.

It was like an endless falling through nullity. The ship could not accelerate, could not spin, for there was nothing which she could move in relation to; for the duration of the trip, she was *irrelevant* to the four-dimensional universe. Weight came back as the inner hull started rotating with respect to the outer, though Lorenzen had already been sick—he never could stand free fall. Then there was nothing to do but settle down for the month or so it would take to reach Lagrange.

And the days passed, swept out by clocks, unmarked by any change—they were only waiting now, doubly held in timelessness. Fifty men, spacers and scientists, fretted out the emptiness of hours and wondered what lay on the other end of the warp.

It was on the fifth day when Lorenzen and Tetsuo Hideki wandered down toward the main lounge. The Manchurian was one of the organic chemists: a small, frail-looking, soft-spoken fellow in loose robes, timid with people and highly competent in his work. Lorenzen thought that Hideki made a barrier against the world out of his test tubes and analyzers, but he rather liked the Asian. *I've done pretty much the same myself, haven't I? I get along all right with people, yes, but down underneath I'm afraid of them.*

"...But why cannot you say that it takes us a month to go to Lagrange? That is the time we measure aboard ship, is it not? It is also the time a Lagrangian or Solarian observer would measure between the moment we entered the warp and the moment we came out."

"Not quite," said Lorenzen. "The math shows that it's meaningless to equate time measured inside the warp with time measured outside. It's not even similar to the time-shift in classical relativity. In the omega-effect equations, the t and t' are two distinct expressions, two different dimensions; they have about the same numerical value, but the conversion factor is not a pure number. The fact that time spent in the warp is about the same no matter how far you go—within a terrifically big radius, up to the point where space curvature becomes significant—indicates that we don't have a true velocity at all." He shrugged. "I don't pretend to understand the whole theory. Not a dozen men can."

“This is your first interstellar trip, is it not, John?”

“Uh-huh. I’ve never been farther than the Moon before.”

“I have never even been off Earth. I believe Captain Hamilton and a couple of the engineers are the only men aboard who have flown the star ways before now. It is strange.” Hideki’s eyes looked scared. “There is much which is strange about this trip. I have never heard of so ill-assorted a crew.”

“N-n-no.” Lorenzen thought over those he knew anything about. There had already been clashes, which Avery had not succeeded very well in smoothing over. “But the Institute had to take what it could get, I suppose, and there are all too many lunatic opinions left over from the wars and the Interregnum. Political fanatics, racial fanatics, religious fanatics—” His voice trailed off.

“I take it you support the Solar government?”

“Sure. I may not like everything it does, but it’s got to compromise with many elements if it’s to be democratic, and stamp out many others if it’s to survive. It’s all that stands between us and a return of anarchy and tyranny.”

“You are right,” said Hideki. “War is a monster—my people know that.” There was a darkness in his eyes. Lorenzen wondered if he was thinking of the Mongku Empire which Mars had shattered, or if his thoughts went still farther back, to the lovely lost islands of Japan and the Fourth World War which had sunk them under the sea.

They came to the entrance of the lounge and paused, looking in to see who was there. It was a big, low room, its furniture and drapes and gentle illumination a rest from the impersonal metallic harshness which was most of the ship; but it seemed rather bare, the Institute had not had time or money to decorate it properly. *They should have taken time,* thought Lorenzen. Men's nerves were worn thin out here between the stars, they needed murals and a bar and a fireplace full of crackling logs. They needed home.

Avery and Gummus-lugil, the ship's chess fiends, were hunched over a board. Miguel Fernandez of Uruguay, geologist, a small dark lively young man, sat thrumming a guitar; near him was Joab Thornton, reading his bible—no, it was Milton this time, and there was a curious lost ecstasy on the ascetic features. Lorenzen, who dabbled with art, thought that the Martian had a fascinating set of angles and planes in his face; he'd like to do his portrait sometime.

Gummus-lugil looked up and saw the newcomers. He was a dark, stocky man, his face broad and hooknosed, his shirt open over a wiry pelt. "Hello, there," he said cheerfully.

"Hello," said Lorenzen. He rather liked the Turk. Gummus-lugil had come up the hard way, it had marked him: he was rude and dogmatic and had no use for literature; but his mind was good, he and Lorenzen had already sat through several watches arguing politics and analytical philosophy and the chances of the Academy team getting the meteor polo pennant next year. "Who's ahead?"

"He is, I'm afraid."

Avery reached out and advanced a bishop. "Guard queen," he said. His voice remained almost apologetic.

"Huh? Oh, yes...yes—Let's see—" Gummus-lugil swore. "This is going to cost me a knight. O.K., O.K." He moved.

Avery avoided the knight, but took a pawn with his rook. “Mate in—five moves,” he said. “Care to resign?”

“Whuzzat?” Feverishly, Gummus-lugil studied the board. Fernandez’s fingers rippled down a chord.

“You see, here…and here…and then—”

“Stop that racket! snarled Gummus-lugil. “How d’you expect me to concentrate?”

Fernandez flushed angrily. “I have as much right—”

Gummus-lugil showed his teeth. “If you could play, it’d be all right,” he snapped. “But go do your caterwauling somewhere else, sonny boy.”

“Hey, there, Kemal, take it easy—” Avery looked alarmed.

Surprisingly, Thornton joined in on the engineer’s side. “This should be a place for peace and quiet,” he clipped. “Why don’t you go play in your bunkroom, Señor Fernandez?”

“There are men off watch there who have to sleep,” answered the Uruguayan. He stood up, knotting his fists together. “And if you think you can dictate to the rest of us—”

Lorenzen stood back, feeling the helpless embarrassment which quarrels always gave him. He tried to say something, but his tongue seemed thick in his mouth

Friedrich von Osten chose that moment to enter. He stood in the farther doorway, swaying a little—it was well known he’d smuggled a case of whisky aboard. He wasn’t an alcoholic, but there were no women along and he couldn’t be polishing his beloved guns forever. A mercenary soldier in the ruins of Europe—even if he does get picked up for the Solar

Academy, and makes good in the Patrol, and is named chief gunner for a star ship—doesn't develop other interests.

"Vot iss?" he asked thickly.

"None of your business!" flared Gummus-lugil. Their two jobs had already required them to work together a lot, and they just didn't get along; two such arrogant souls couldn't.

"I make it my business, den." Von Osten stepped forward, hunching his great shoulders; the yellow beard bristled, and the wide battered face was red. "So you are picking on Miguel again?"

"I can handle my own affairs," stated Fernandez flatly. "You and this Puritan crank can stay out of them."

Thornton bit his lip. "I wouldn't talk about cranks," he said, rising to his own feet.

Fernandez got a wild look about him. Everybody knew that his family on the mother's side had spearheaded the Sebastianist Rebellion a century ago; Avery had quietly passed the word along with a warning not to mention it.

"Now, Joab—" The government man hastened toward the Martian, waving his hands in the air. "Now take it easy, gentlemen, please—"

"If all you fuse-blown gruntbrains would mind your own business—" began Gummus-lugil.

"Iss no such t'ing as own business here!" shouted von Osten. "Ve iss all *zusammen*—togedder, and I vould vish to put you under Patrol discipline vun day only!

Trust him to say exactly the wrong thing at the wrong moment, thought Lorenzen sickly. *His being essentially right only makes it the more* *insufferable.*

"Look—" He opened his mouth, and the stutter that always grabbed him when he was excited made him wordless again.

Gummus-lugil took a stiff-legged step toward the German. "If you want to step outside a minute, we'll settle that," he said.

"Gentlemen!" wailed Avery.

"Are they, now?" asked Thornton.

"Und du kannst auch herausgehen!" bellowed von Osten, turning on him.

"Nobody insults me," snarled Fernandez. His small wiry body gathered itself as if to attack.

"Keep out of this, sonny," said Gummus-lugil. "It's bad enough your starting it—"

Fernandez made a noise that was half a sob and jumped for him. The Turk sprang back in surprise. When a fist grazed his cheek, his own leaped out and Fernandez lurched back.

Von Osten yelled and swung at Gummus-lugil. "Give me a hand," gasped Avery. "Get them apart!" He almost dragged Thornton along with him. The Martian got a grip on von Osten's waist and pulled. The German kicked at his ankles. Thornton snapped his lips together over a cry of pain and tried to trip his opponent. Gummus-lugil stood where he was, panting.

"What the devil is going on here?"

They all turned at that shout. Captain Hamilton stood in the doorway.

He was a tall man, solidly built, heavy-featured, thick gray hair above the deep-lined face; he wore the blue undress uniform of the Union Patrol, of which he was a reservist, with mathematical correctness; his normally low voice became a quarterdeck roar, and the gray eyes were like chill iron as they swept the group.

“I thought I heard a quarrel in here—but a brawl!”

They moved away from each other, sullenly, looking at him but not meeting his gaze.

He stood for a very long while, regarding them with a raking contempt. Lorenzen tried to make himself small. But down somewhere inside himself, he wondered how much of that expression was a good job of acting. Hamilton was a bit of a martinet, yes, and he’d had himself psyched as thoroughly as he could be, to get rid of all fears and compulsions irrelevant to his work—but he couldn’t be that much of a machine. He had children and grandchildren in Canada; he liked gardening; he was not unsympathetic when—

“All of you here have university degrees.” The captain was speaking very quietly now. “You’re educated men, scientists and technicians. You’re the cream of Sol’s intellect, I’m told. Well, if you are, God help us all!”

There was no answer.

“I suppose you know expeditions like this are dangerous enough at best,” went on Hamilton. “I also believe you were told that the first expedition to Troas never got back. To me, it seems reasonable that if we’re to survive at all, we have to make a team and work together against whatever it was that killed the first ship. Apparently it does not seem so to you.”

He grinned with careful nastiness. “Presumably you scientists also think I’m just the pilot. I’m just a conductor whose only business is to get you to Troas and back. If you believe that, I advise you to read the articles again—assuming you can read. I’m responsible for the safety of the whole ship, including your lives, God help me. That means I'm the boss, too. From the moment you entered the air lock at Earth to the moment you leave it again back at Earth, I'm the boss.

"I don't care who started this or who did what in which manner to whom. It's enough that there was a fight where there shouldn't have been one. You're all going in the brig for a day—without food. Maybe that'll teach you some manners."

"But I didn't—" whispered Hideki.

"Exactly," snapped Hamilton. "I want every man aboard to have a vested interest in preventing this sort of thing. If your lives, and the lives of everybody else, don't matter to you, maybe your fat-gutted bellies will."

"But I *tried*—" wailed Avery.

"And failed. A rust-eaten failure if I ever saw one. You get brigged for incompetence, Mr. Avery. It's your job to see that tensions don't build up this way. All right, now—march!"

They marched. Not a word was said.

Somewhat later, Hideki murmured in the darkness of the brig: "It isn't fair. Who does he think he is?"

Lorenzen shrugged, his own easygoing temperament asserting itself. "Does it matter?"

"But if he keeps this up, everyone will hate him!"

"I imagine he's a pretty good rule-of-thumb psychman himself. Quite probably that's what he wants."

Later, lying in blindness on a hard narrow bunk, Lorenzen wondered what had gone wrong. Avery talked to all the men privately, counseled them, tried to ease their fears and hatreds so that they wouldn't turn on others. At least, he was supposed to. But he hadn't. Maybe there was a curse on Lagrange after all.

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The sky was incredible.

Here in the center of the great cluster, the double star was a double blaze. Lagrange I seemed as bright as Sol, though only half the apparent size, a blue-green flame ringed with eerie halos of corona and zodiacal light; when the glare was filtered out, you could see prominences monstrous on its rim. Lagrange II, a third of Sol's angular diameter but almost as luminous, was a rich orange-red. When both their lights streamed through the viewports into a darkened room, men's faces had an unearthly color, they seemed themselves transfigured.

The stars were so brilliant that some of them could be seen even through that haze of radiance. When you looked out from the shadow side of the ship, the sky was a hard crystal black spattered with stars—great unwinking diamonds, flashing and flashing, confused myriads, a throng of them glittering in a glory such as Earth's dwellers had never seen. It was lonely to think that the light of them which Earth now saw had left when man was still huddled in caves; that the light now streaming from them would be seen in an unthinkable future when there might be no more men on Earth.

The *Hudson* had taken an orbit about Troas, some four thousand kilometers out. The companion, Ilium, looked almost four times as big as Luna seen from Earth; the limb was blurred by the thin atmosphere, and the harsh glare of dead sea-bottoms mottled the bluish face. A small world, old before its time, no place to colonize; but it would be a rich nearby source of minerals for men on Troas.

That planet hung enormous in the viewports, filling nearly half the sky. You could see the air about it, clouds and storms, day and night. The icecaps covering a third of its face were blinding white, the restless tide-whipped oceans were a blueness which focused the light of one sun to a cruel point. There were islands and one major continent, its north and south ends buried under the ice, spreading easterly and westerly halfway round the planet. It was green about the equator, hazing into darker green and brown toward the poles. Lakes and rivers were like silver threads across it. A high mountain range, rugged sweep of light and shadow, ran down either coast.

The half-dozen men in the ship's observatory hung in weightless silence. The mingled light of the suns gleamed off the metal of their instruments. They were supposed to compare notes on their several observations, but for a while they didn't want to speak, this was too awesome.

"Well?" Hamilton barked it out at last. "What have you found?"

"Essentially—" Lorenzen gulped. The anti-space sickness pills helped some, but he still felt weak, he longed for weight and clean air. "Essentially, we've confirmed what the Hercules expedition noted. Mass of the planets, distance, atmosphere, temperature—and yes, the green down there definitely has the absorption spectrum of chlorophyll."

"Any sign of life?"

"Oh, yes, quite a bit of it. Not only the plants, but animals, huge herds of them. I've got plenty of photographs." Lorenzen shook his head. "Not a trace of the *Da Gama*, though. We've looked for two of the planet's days, and we could surely have spotted their boats or an abandoned camp. But nothing.”

“Could they have landed on Sister and come to grief there?” Christopher Umfanduma, the African biologist, gestured at the stark face of Ilium.

“No,” said Hamilton. “Doctrine for these survey trips is that the expedition goes first to the planet it has announced it will go to. If for any reason they then go elsewhere, they leave a cairn big enough to be seen from space. We can check Sister, but my conviction is that the trouble happened on Junior. Sister is too typical, it’s like Mars; nothing much *can* happen to well-trained spacemen in a place like that.”

“Other planets in this system?” asked Hideki. “Maybe they—”

“No, there aren’t any. Just a stinking little group of asteroids in the other Trojan position. Planetary formation theory and considerations of stability just about prohibit anything else, but I checked on the way in to make sure.”

“Of course,” ventured Avery, very softly, “the expedition could perhaps have left Troas in good form and perished on the way home.”

Hamilton snorted. “Nothing can happen to a ship in the warp. No, it’s down”—his deep-set eyes went to the planet and rested there, darkly—“on Junior that whatever happened to them, happened. But why no trace of them? The *Da Gama* herself ought still to be in orbit up here. The boats ought to be visible down there. Were they sunk into the ocean?”

“By whom?” Avery said it into a sudden enormous quiet. “Or by what?”

“There’s no trace of intelligent life, I tell you,” said Lorenzen wearily. “At this distance, our telescopes could spot anything from a city or an aircraft to the thatch hut of some savage.”

“Maybe they don’t build huts,” said Avery. His face looked abstracted.

“Shut up,” snapped Hamilton. “You’ve got no business here anyway. This is a mapping room.”

Hideki shivered. “It looks cold down there,” he said. “Bleak.”

“It isn’t,” said Fernandez. “Around the equator, the climate ought to be rather like, say, Norway or Maine. And you will note that the trees and grasses go right up to the swamps at the foot of the glaciers. Glacial periods aren’t anywhere near as barren as people think; Earth was full of animal life in the Pleistocene, and it wasn’t till hunting got worse when the glaciers receded that man was forced to develop agriculture and become civilized. Anyway, those glaciers are on the way out; I’ve seen distinct moraines in the photographs. When we settle here and jack up the carbon dioxide content of the air, you will be surprised how fast Junior will develop its own tropics. A few hundred years, perhaps. Geologically, nothing!” He snapped his fingers and grinned.

“If we settle it,” grunted Hamilton. “Now, how long before you can have reliable maps, Lorenzen?”

“Um-m-m…well…a week, maybe. But do we have to wait that long?”

“We do. I want one overall map on a scale of one in a million, and enough others to cover the central valley region where we’ll land—say from five degrees on either side of the equator—on one to ten thousand. Print up about fifty copies of each. Run your prime meridian through the north magnetic pole; you can send down a roboflyer to locate it.”

Lorenzen groaned inwardly. He had the cartographic machines to help him, but it wasn’t going to be fun.

“I’ll take a boat and a few men and run over for a closer look at Sister,” went on Hamilton. “Not that I expect to find anything much, but—” Suddenly he grinned. “You can name the conspicuous features down there anything you like, but don't be like that Chilean map-man at Epsilon Eridani III! His maps had been official for ten years before they found out every one of his names was an Araucanian obscenity!"

He clapped the astronomer's shoulder and pulled himself out of the room. *Not a bad sort,* thought Lorenzen. *He's a better psychman than Avery, though Ed isn't such a slouch either; he just lacks personality.*

He decided to stick by the classical nomenclature of the Hercules expedition. Mount Olympus, Mount Ida, the huge river down there would be the Scamander and, of course, it wouldn't last. When the colonists came, it would be Old Baldy, Conchinjangua, Novaya Neva—

If the colonists came.

"Let's, uh, let's get organized," he said aloud, awkwardly. "How many here know anything about cartography?"

"I do," said Avery unexpectedly. "I'll help out if you wish."

"Where in cosmos did you pick that up?" asked Fernandez.

"Part of my education. A lot of applied psychodynamics consists of conformal mapping, though we generally have to use spaces of several dimensions and non-Cartesian coordinates. I can handle a mapping machine as well as you can."

Lorenzen blinked. After a moment, he nodded. The modern science of human behavior was out of his line but he'd seen some of the texts; they used more paramathematical symbols than his own.

He crooked an arm around a hand-rung and let his legs stream out behind him. Avery had said his tendency to space sickness was mostly psychological. ("You're all knotted up inside, John. You ought to take a year off and get a series of treatments. It's free, you know.")

"How precise is your science, anyway?" he asked. "The popular articles on it are always so vague."

"Well—" Avery rubbed his chin. He hung cross-legged in the air like a small Buddha, his eyes remote. "Well, we don't claim the precision of the physical sciences," he said finally. "In fact, it's been shown rigorously that we can never achieve it: a kind of uncertainty principle of our own, due to coupling between observer and system observed. But a lot has been learned."

"Such as what?" inquired Umfanduma. "I know about the advances in neurology, that's in my own line. But how about man as…as man, instead of as a biophysical mechanism?"

"The amount of knowledge depends on the particular field of study," said Avery. "Already before World War III, they were using games theory in military work, and later the big computers made it possible to analyze even complex phenomena like business from a theoretical viewpoint; that in turn led to some understanding of economics. Communications theory turned out to be widely applicable: man is, after all, essentially a symbolizing animal. The least effort axiom was useful. Gradually a mathematical and paramathematical system has been built up, in which the elements—potentials, gradients, and so on—can be equated with observable phenomena; thus it becomes possible to derive theorems. It's still hard to check the validity of many of these theorems, conditions at home are too confused even today and of course you can't very well run a controlled experiment with human beings; but in so far as we have data, they confirm the present theories. Quite often it's possible to predict large-scale things like economic cycles with high precision."

"Didn't the dictators know most of that?" asked Lorenzen. "They certainly had effective propaganda techniques. I was more interested in modern developments—"

"Most of it is modern," snorted Avery. "Very little that went before was of scientific value. To consider only the history of my own region, North America: the propagandists of capital and labor, the advertising men, worked on such a primitive level, with such a primitive appeal, that quite often they produced a reaction against themselves; some historians think that the only thing the advertising business ever really sold was the advertising business. They were only part of the mass-psychological debacle that led to military defeat. The commissars were mentally blinkered by their own outworn ideology; they never dared investigate beyond its dogma. The self-styled Liberators were only interested in getting that power for themselves; it wasn't their propaganda which won the people to them, but the commissars' tyranny, and they were soon just as unpopular. The warlords during the Interregnum did have psychomilitary analysts, yes, but the only original work then was done in Brazil. Later, in the theocratic period, research was pushed because the Mongku Empire presented a challenge and the first politicomathematical analyses were performed; but since that war was fought by bred professionals, for limited goals, the results weren't used for much till the Mongkus engineered the Sebastianist revolt in Brazil. But it wasn't till after Venus had taken over and Earth was temporarily at peace and the theocrats tossed out of America, that really thorough research was done. Then, of course, we finally got the formulated psychodynamics, the field and tensor approach, and it was used to bring on the Mars-Venus war and unify the Solar System—but the completed science had been worked out by peaceful professors interested only in the problem itself; their type is still doing all the major new work."

"Whew!" laughed Umfanduma.

"Completed science, did you say?" inquired Lorenzen. "I thought—"

"Oh, yes, work is still going on, all the time. But the results are already far enough along to be of inestimable value. Control of the economic cycle, for instance; the most efficient distribution of cities; currency stabilization; the gradual weaning of man away from barbarism toward the first really mature civilization—a civilization where *everyone* is sane." Something glowed behind the pudgy face and the blinking pale eyes. "It's a heartbreakingly big job, it'll take centuries and there'll be many setbacks and failures and mistakes—but at least, for the first time in history, we have not only good intentions, but some idea of how to implement them."

"Yes, I suppose so," murmured Lorenzen. His mind continued: *You can't elect a psychocrat, any more than you can elect an engineer. I don't want an elite of any kind, the world has seen too many of them; with all its maddening drawbacks, parliamentary government is still the only way, the psychocrats must still remain only advisors.*

But one gets into the habit of letting the advisors lead—

He sighed and shoved away from the wall. "Come on," he said. "Work to do."

-6-

Lorenzen knew that an unknown planet was approached cautiously, but the knowledge had only been in the top of his head. This was the first time he lived through that scare, and it nearly drove him crazy.

When the maps were ready, four boats descended—forty men, with a skeleton crew remaining on the *Hudson* in her orbit. Fernandez sweated on the way down; it was he who had picked the landing site, and his fault if it turned out to be a morass or an earthquake region. But nothing happened.

That was exactly the trouble—nothing happened. They landed some kilometers from the Scamander, on a wide green plain dotted with clumps of trees and hazing into blue distance. Silence fell when the rockets were cut off; the grass fire they had started burned itself out; and men stared wistfully through the viewports at the sunlit world outside.

The chemists and biologists were busy. There was detailed analyses to do—of air, of soil and vegetation samples brought in by robots. Thornton checked radiation and reported nothing harmful. A cageful of rhesus monkeys was set outside and left for a week. During that week, nobody stirred from the boats. The robots which came and went were sterilized with savage thoroughness in the air locks. There was nothing for the rest of the men to do.

Lorenzen buried himself in his micro-books, but even Shakespeare and Jensen and "The Song of the Jovian Men" got wearisome. Others puttered about, quibbled with each other, yawned and slept and woke blearily to another day of nothing. There were no open quarrels on this boat, Hamilton was aboard it; but the captain often had to snap furiously over the telescreen at men in the other craft.

Fernandez came close to losing his temper once. He protested to Hamilton: "You can't be that frightened of sickness!"

"I sure can," grunted the captain. "If evolution on this planet is as close to Earth's as it seems to be, you can bet your degree there are some microbes which can live off us. And I want to go home on my feet. The least I can do is make reasonably sure we won't catch anything air-borne."

Hideki and his team reported on such plants as they had analyzed: essentially terrestroid, though denser and tougher. Some were poisonous because of heavy-metal content or the like, but most could be eaten quite safely; a man could live well on the wild vegetation alone. It would take more study, though, to determine just how many sorts you had to eat for a balanced diet.

It was quite an event when they had their first meal of Troan food. The flavors were indescribable—Lorenzen grew aware of how impoverished most human languages are with respect to taste and smell sensations—but there were hints of ginger and cinnamon and garlic. He grinned and suggested: “Perhaps the soul of Escoffier isn’t in Paradise at all; maybe he was given special permission to fly around the galaxy and see what he could whomp up.”

Thornton frowned, and Lorenzen flushed—but how do you apologize for a joke? He said nothing, but winced when he remembered the incident.

Hamilton only permitted half the men to eat that meal, and observed them closely during the day that followed.

Now and then animals were seen, most of them small fleeting shapes that scuttled through the long grasses on the edge of the burned area; but once a herd of bigger quadrupeds, the size of ponies, wandered past: grayish-green, scaled, with long hoofed legs and earless reptilian heads. Umfanduma cursed with his impatience to get a closer look.

“If the reptiles have developed that far,” he said, “I’ll give odds there are no mammals.”

“Reptiles—in a glacial period?” asked Fernandez skeptically. “Not that big, my friend.”

“Oh, not reptiles strictly speaking, but closer to that stage than terrestrial mammals. There are cold and warm seasons here, I’m told, so they must have warm blood and well-developed hearts; but they certainly don’t look placental.”

"That's another argument in favor of there being no intelligent life here," said Lorenzen. "It looks as if this planet is wide open, just waiting for man."

"Yes—just waiting." Avery spoke with a sudden surprising bitterness. "Waiting for mines and cities and roads, for the hills to be leveled and the plains filled up with people. For our dogs and cats and cows and pigs to wipe out the infinite variety of native life. For noise and dust and crowding."

"Don't you like the human race, Ed?" asked Gummus-lugil sardonically. "I thought your job required you to."

"I like the human race in its proper place—which is Earth," said Avery. "Oh, well." He shrugged and smiled. "Never mind."

"We've got a piece of work to do," said Hamilton. "It's not our department to worry about the consequences."

"A lot of men have said that throughout history," replied the psychman. "Soldiers, executioners, scientists building atomic bombs. Well—" He turned away, sighing.

Lorenzen grimaced. He remembered the green rustling stillness of the Alaskan woods, the stark wild glory of the Lunar peaks—there was little enough of that left in the Solar System, few enough places where you could be alone. It did seem a pity that Troas—

After a week, the monkeys were brought in. Umfanduma checked them carefully, killed and dissected them, ran analyses with the help of Hideki. "All normal," he reported. "I found some types of native bacteria in their bloodstream, living harmlessly and completely sterile; apparently they can't reproduce in the chemical conditions of the terrestrial body. You wouldn't even get a fever from them."

Hamilton’s lean gray head nodded. “All right,” he said at last, slowly. “I guess we can go out.”

He led the way. There was a brief ceremony of planting the flag of the Solar Union. Lorenzen stood bareheaded with the rest, the wind ruffling his hair under an alien sky, and thought that in this big lonely landscape the whole affair was a little ridiculous.

For a couple of days the site boiled with activity as camp was set up, men and robots working around the clock. There was always light, from the green or red sun or both, or from the great shield of Sister, high in a sky that burned with an unbelievable glory of stars. The work was hampered by friction between men; it seemed strange that they should quarrel when they were as isolated as men had ever been. But it went on. A neat circle of collapsible shelters grew up around the clustered boats; the main generator began to throb and there was electric light; a well was tapped, a sterilizing unit built, and there was running water; a ring of detectors and alarms and guns was drawn about the camp. The shelters became sleeping quarters, a mess hall, a sick bay, several laboratories, a machine shop. Their metal half-cylinders looked harsh and out of place in the soft landscape.

After that, Lorenzen found himself rather a fifth wheel. There wasn’t much for an astronomer to do. He set up a telescope, but between the suns and the satellite there was always too much light for effective study. In the scurrying busyness of the camp, he began to feel homesick.

He went in their one aircar with some others to the Scamander, to take a closer look and gather specimens. The river was enormous, a slowly rolling brown sheet; when you stood on one reedy bank, you couldn’t see the other. The fish, insects, and plants didn’t interest him much; as a zoological layman, he was more for the larger animals, paraphylon and astymax and tetrapterus. Hunting was easy, none of them seemed to have known anything like man and a rifle bowled them over as they approached curiously closer. Everybody wore a sidearm, for there were carnivores; you could hear them howling at night—but there was really nothing to fear from them.

There were no tall trees; the low scrubby growths which dotted the plains were incredibly tough, an ax would hardly dent them and you needed an AH torch to cut them down. The biological team reported them—on the basis of dendrochronology—to be some centuries old, they grew slowly. They wouldn't be of much use to man, he'd have to bring his own seedlings and use forced-growth techniques if he wanted lumber. But the catalogue of edible plants and animals grew apace. A man could be set down here naked and alone, and if he knew anything at all about flint-working he could soon be comfortable.

Then what had happened to the men of the *Da Gama?*

It could not have been Junior's own environment. It wasn't that alien; as far as wild beasts and disease went, it looked safer than some parts of Earth even today. Now in the warm season, the days were bright and the rains were merely cool; there would be snow in winter, but nothing that fire and furs couldn't stand off. The low carbon dioxide content of the air required a slight change in breathing habits, but it was easily, almost unconsciously made. The lighting was weird—sometimes greenish, sometimes reddish, sometimes a blend of both, with double shadows and the colors of the landscape shifting with the suns—but it was not unpleasing, surely nothing to cause madness. There were poisonous plants, a couple of men got a bad rash from merely brushing one herb, but anyone with half a brain could soon learn to avoid those types. The land was quiet, speaking only with a sough of wind and rush of rain and thunder, remote cry of animals and beat of wings in the sky—But that, too, was only a relief after the clangor of civilization.

Well—

Lorenzen puttered with his instruments, measuring the exact periods of revolution and rotation for the planet and the heavenly bodies. The rest of the time he helped out, awkwardly, where he could, or talked to men off duty, or played games, or sat around and read. It wasn't his fault, this idleness, but he felt obscurely guilty about it. Maybe he should consult Avery. The psychman seemed rather a lost soul himself.

Twelve of Junior's thirty-six hour days slipped past, and then the aliens came.

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A telescope swinging on its clockwork mounting. Sudden shapes moving in its field. A photocell reacts, and the feedback circuit holds the 'scope leveled on the approaching objects. As they come nearer, an alarm is tripped and a siren skirls into the quiet air.

Friedrich von Osten jumped from the cot on which he had been dozing. *"Lieber Gott!"* He grabbed a rifle, and loosened the magnum pistol at his waist as he ran from the tent. Other men were sticking their heads out of the shelters, looking up from their work, hurrying to their posts at the machine gun emplacements.

Von Osten reached the command post and poised on the edge of its trench, raising his field glasses. There were…yes…eight of them, walking steadily toward the camp. It was too far yet to see details, but sunlight flashed hard off metal.

He picked up the intercom mike and said harshly: “Stand by all defense stations. Iss Captain Hamilton dere?”

“Speaking. I’m up in the bow of Boat One. They look…intelligent…don’t they?”

“Ja, I t’ink dey are.”

“All right. Stand by. Keep them covered, but don’t shoot till I say so. That’s an order. No matter what happens, don’t shoot till I tell you to.”

“Efen if dey open up on us?”

“Yes.”

The siren rose to a new note. Alarm stations! General alert!

Lorenzen ran for the shack assigned to him. The camp was a scurrying confusion, shouts and thud of feet, dust swirling up to dull the drawn guns. The aircar shot overhead, rising for a bird’s-eye look. *Or tetrapterus eye?* thought Lorenzen wildly. *There are no birds here. This isn’t our world.*

He entered the shelter. It was crowded with a dozen men, untrained in militechnics and assigned here mostly to keep them out of the way. Avery’s round face gaped at him; the light of Lagrange I, streaming in the window, looked ghastly on his skin. “Natives? “he asked.

“I…suppose so.” Lorenzen bit his lip. “Seems to be half a dozen or so, coming on foot. What are we s-s-scared of?”

“Thornton’s long gaunt face thrust out of a shadowed corner. “There is no point in taking chances,” he said. “No telling what those…things… intend, or what powers they command. ‘Be ye therefore wise as serpents —’”

“‘…And harmless as doves,’” finished Avery. “But are we?” He shook his head. “Man is still adolescent. And this reaction is…childish. Fear of the unknown. With all the energies we have to use, we're still afraid. It's wrong."

"The *Da Gama,"* said Thornton tightly, "did not come back."

"I don't think…simple planet-bound natives, without so much as a city, could have been…responsible," said Avery.

"Something was," said Lorenzen. He felt cold. "They might have weapons—b-b-bacteriological—"

"It's childish, I tell you, this fear." Avery's voice wobbled. "We've all got to die sometime. We should greet them openly and—"

"And talk to them, I suppose?" Thornton grinned. "How good is your Lagrangian, Avery?"

There was silence. The noise outside had died away, now the whole camp lay waiting.

Lorenzen looked at the chronom on his wrist. It swept out the minutes, one, two, three, ten, thirty, and time was hideously stretched. It was hot in the cabin, hot and dusty. He felt sweat trickle down under his clothes.

Forever went by in an hour. And then the siren blew. *All clear…come out…but stay alert!*

Lorenzen almost bolted from the shelter. He was close enough to the point where the aliens were to get there ahead of the crowd.

A semicircle of men, rifles in the crook of their arms, faced the strangers and held back the approaching humans. Hamilton stood in front of the guard, stiff and massive, watching the newcomers out of expressionless eyes. They looked back at him, and there was no reading their faces.

Lorenzen took them in at one gulping glance, and then went back for details. He had seen films of extraterrestrials before, and these were not as unearthly as some that had already been found—but still, it was a shock to see them here in the flesh. It was the first time he truly, fully realized that man was not unique, not anything special in the immensity of creation.

They stood on their hind legs like men, though with a forward slant which reduced their potential one and three fourths-meter height by a good ten centimeters; a heavy kangaroolike tail balanced the body, and was probably a wicked weapon for infighting. The arms were rather skinny, otherwise humanoid, but the hands had three fingers and two opposed thumbs; each finger had an extra joint, and ended in sharp blue nails. The heads were round, with tufted ears, flat black noses, pointed chins, whiskers above the wide black-lipped mouths and the long golden eyes. They seemed to be mammals—at least, they were covered with smooth gray fur, barred in darker color that formed a mask about the eyes. Their sex was probably male, though Lorenzen couldn't he sure from their clothing: loose blouses and baggy pants apparently woven of vegetable fiber, and a kind of mukluk on the feet. They all had leather belts supporting a couple of pouches, a knife or hatchet, and what was presumably a powder horn; on their backs were small packsacks, in their hands long-barreled affairs which he took to be muzzle-loading smoothbores.

In the first moment, they all looked alike to him; then he forced himself lo locate individual differences of size, build, face: they varied as much as humans.

One of them spoke, a throaty purr. When his mouth was open, you could see the long blue canine teeth, though otherwise they seemed dentally as unspecialized as man.

Hamilton turned around. "They don't act like a war party," he said. His voice and the low murmur of wind were the only sounds. "But you can't ever tell—Avery, you're a linguist. Can you make anything out of their talk?"

"Not…yet." The psychman's face was shiny with sweat, and his voice jittered. Lorenzen wondered why he should be that excited. "They do have distinct words."

"Hell," grunted Gummus-lugil, "I can't even hear that. It all sounds alike to me."

Another of the strangers spoke. Straining, Lorenzen could make out the pauses between phoneme groups. He'd taken a course in comparative linguistics at college, but it was vague in his mind now.

"They act like…well, I don't know what," said Hamilton. "Except that we're obviously not great gods from the sky to them."

"Wouldn't expect that." Avery shook his head. "If they've progressed as far as gunpowder hand weapons, I imagine their society is pretty sophisticated. Those muskets look better than what they had on Earth in Newton's time."

"But where are they *from?*" cried Fernandez. "There are no cities, no roads, not even so much as a village—I doubt if there is a house on this planet!"

Hamilton shrugged. "That's what I hope we can find out." His voice grew crisp: "Avery, you work on their language, that's your line. Von Osten, maintain guards at the defense posts, and detail a man to accompany each of these creatures wherever he goes within the bounds of the camp. But no rough stuff unless they try something extremely suspicious, and no holding them here if they want to leave. The rest of you carry on as before, but keep your arms ready all the time and don't leave camp without checking with me first."

It was sensible, thought Lorenzen. The strangers didn't look formidable, but you never knew, you never knew.

Slowly, the group broke up. The aliens followed Avery docilely enough, and one by one the others quit staring after them. Lorenzen heard Fernandez's murmur: "Natives after all! And pretty highly developed, too."

"Yeh." There was an odd sag to Gummis-lugil's heavy shoulders. "It looks like this pretty well kills the idea of colonizing."

Which may be the death-blow to all man's dreams about the stars.

Lorenzen tagged along after Avery. "Can I help you, Ed?" he asked.

"You're not a linguist, John," said the psychman. "I'm afraid you'd only be in the way."

Lorenzen felt a stinging sense of rebuff. He gulped and persisted: "You'll need help. Somebody to act out the verbs, and—"

Avery considered for what seemed a curiously long time. "All right," he said at last. "To start with, anyway."

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The aliens were offered a bunkhouse and moved into it with alacrity; another was set up for the displaced humans. They were shown through the camp and the boats, but there was no telling what they thought about it. Men noticed that they always had somebody on watch while they slept. They didn't seem to like messing with the humans, and used their own utensils to cook native food given them. But they stayed around for days, and worked hard with Avery and Lorenzen.

It seemed they called themselves Rorvan, as nearly as a human throat could form the word. Individual names emerged for them: Silish, Yanvusarran, Alasvu—Pointing to objects and acting out verbs began to give an elementary vocabulary and the whole stock of phonemes: it was a flexible tongue, they had almost fifty. Tonal qualities seemed to be important, but in analyzing his data Avery said the language was not analogous to Chinese. “I’m pretty sure it’s inflected,” he declared, “but I can’t make head or tail out of the grammar. Possibly the tones form the inflections, but—” He sighed.

“Why not teach them English or Spanish?” inquired Lorenzen.

“I don’t want to scare them off by the prospect of so much hard work. They may be just a group of wanderers who chanced on us and will decide any moment to take off again. Don’t forget, they could be anything from official ambassadors to hobos or bandits, or something for which we have no word. We know nothing about the structure of their society or about them personally.” Avery ran a hand through his thin hair and looked at the notes he had. “Their language just doesn’t make sense!”

“Let me study your data for a while,” offered Lorenzen. “I know a little something about glossanalysis.”

“Not just yet, John. I want to go over it myself a few more times. I’ll run off a copy for you soon.”

The next day Lorenzen was asked to go in the aircar to help in a specimen-collecting expedition. He could not very well refuse, though he fumed at the delay. When he came back, Avery gave him a sheaf of papers and a wry grin.

“Here you are,” he said. “I got a lot of information yesterday while you were off, but it leaves me in a worse mess than before. A lot of it contradicts what I thought I knew.”

Lorenzen spent hours over the copy and had to confess himself beaten. The word for too many important things, or the meaning of a given sound, varied without discoverable rhyme or reason. Sister, for instance, was referred to as Ortu, Omanyi, Valakesh, Arbvu-djangiz, Zulei, and a whistling noise answering to nothing in any human tongue; and it looked as if each of these words took on an entirely different meaning in other sentences. It didn't seem merely a question of synonymy: you wouldn't expect the Rorvan to be so stupid as to confuse the issue thus. The name seemed to depend on the context in some obscure manner. The whole mass of conversation held nothing identifiable as a statement.

He gave up, realizing with discouragement that he was doubtless only underfoot. Avery continued working doggedly, sitting up late to ponder each day's material. But he was the only one who didn't feel a darkness of futility.

"What are we staying here for, anyway?" demanded Gummus-lugil. "There are natives. They seem to be in a position to make colonization impossible. Why not just go home and get drunk and forget the whole mucking place?"

"We're supposed to complete the survey," said Lorenzen mildly.

Gummus-lugil look out a foul old pipe and began to stuff it. His heavy dark face twisted into a scowl. "Survey my eye! You know as well as I do this is a practical expedition. We're wasting time we ought to be using to find a planet we can have."

Lorenzen sighed. "I wonder if we ever will. It was tough enough to finance this trip. D'you think anybody can raise the cash for another? There's too much to do right at home for Parliament to spend more of the public funds on what's beginning to look like a wild goose chase, and individuals with money to donate are getting few and far between."

"Don't you care?" asked the Turk.

"Oh...yes. I suppose so. But I never intended to leave Sol permanently." With sudden understanding: "This means a lot to you, though, doesn't it, Kemal?"

"The engineer nodded. "It does. It did. I'm getting to an age where I want to settle down somewhere and raise a family. Only what can a man do in the System? Work for somebody else, all his life. I want to be my own boss. I thought...oh, hell." His voice trailed off and he stared emptily across the plain.

"There is a bit of hope yet," said Lorenzen. "It may be that the natives live underground or some such thing. That they won't care if we colonize the surface. They'd stand to benefit, even, if that's the case—trade and so on."

"It could be." There was a brief flicker in Gummus-lugil's eyes, and then a hardness grew in him. One hairy hand doubled into a fist. "But *something* happened to the first expedition! I suspect the natives murdered them and buried the traces—"

"I doubt it," said Lorenzen, though a thin little fear rose in his breast. "How'd they have gotten at the ship in her orbit? How'd the personnel get so careless as to let it happen at all? No, I still think space got them somehow. A chance meteor, just at the wrong moment, or-—"

"Things like that don't happen to spaceships any more."

"They could, if all the improbabilities worked out just right. Or look—you say there was an attempt to sabotage the *Hudson*?"

"Yeh. Wait a minute...d'you mean—-"

"I don't mean anything, Kemal. But there are groups at home which are opposed to the whole colony idea. The Resurrectionists think it's against the will of God. The Monarchists, the Collectivists, and the Eugenicists are all fanatics and all know that even their infinitesimal chance of getting into power will be gone if men start moving out of the System. Then there's Hilton's group, with its vague fear of the whole notion, pseudoscientific ideas about extraterrestrial diseases or invasion or the colonists mutating into something different and hostile—you see?"

"A bomb planted in the *Da Gama*." Gummus-lugil rubbed his chin. "It wouldn't have been too hard; she wasn't built from the keel up like ours. Of course, it's hard to see how our converter could have been monkeyed with. All our workers, right down to the last electrician, were screened by the government with just that sabotage idea in mind. But it could be. It could be."

"In that case—" A small exultance rose in Lorenzen. "In that case, we have nothing to fear."

"But they have plenty to fear from me!" The Turk's hand dropped to his gun.

Another day went by. The blue-green sun rose, mists swirled and dew flashed and then the grasses lay with a metallic sheen. Six hours later the red sun followed, and full day blazed. Clouds were tinted red or green, the double shadows had their color, the vegetation shimmered in shifting hues as wind ruffled it. The first sunset was not so spectacular, with Lagrange II still high in the sky, but the late afternoon had an eerie quality when the only light was its fiery glow. Paradox: it grew cool, even a little chilly, when only the smaller sun was up, but the unearthly red radiance suggested a furnace. The second sunset was usually a gorgeous bursting of crimson and orange and gold. Then it was night, with a glittering glory of stars. Sister came up, red on one limb and blue-green on the other, the center a dimness of shadow vaguely lit by reflection from Junior. On the horizon, she looked enormous, seeming to fill half the sky; when well up, she was still so big that men used to Luna could not get rid of an uneasy notion that she was falling on them. Her light was a weird white rush of argence, flimmering off dew and hoarfrost. The night was big and still and strange to man.

It caught at Lorenzen. He walked alone in the chill quiet, thinking his own thoughts, and felt the challenge of the sky and the world about him. Maybe he would want to come here after all. A new planet would be wide open for any man; he could have his own observatory on a space station, try out his own ideas, look at his own land and realize it was his and his children's.

But the natives—His spirits sagged again.

Another day and another.

Lorenzen was sitting under his usual tree with his usual book when he heard his name called. He looked up, and the camp's loudspeaker rolled and boomed with Hamilton's voice : "...Report to the captain's office." He got up, wondering, and made his way back inside the circle of guns.

Hamilton sat at a desk in one of the huts. Avery stood beside him, looking nervous. Thornton, Fernandez, Gummus-lugil, and von Osten were already there, waiting.

"All here," said the captain quietly. "You may pass on your report, Mr. Avery."

The psychman cleared his throat. "I've made a little headway with the Rorvan language," he said. He spoke so low that it was hard to hear him. "Not much—I still don't understand the grammar or whatever it is they have, and any ideas above an elementary level just don't get across. But we can talk about very simple things. Today they said they want to go home. I couldn't follow their reason, though I imagine they want to report their findings."

"All of them going?" asked Thornton.

"Yes. I offered to have them flown home, but they refused. Why, I don't know. They couldn't have misunderstood me, I *think.* I took them to the aircar and made gestures. But maybe they don't trust us that much. They insist on going on foot."

"Where is their home?" inquired Lorenzen.

"Somewhere to the west, in the mountains. That's all I was able to gather. About a four-week hike, I'd say."

"Vell?" snapped von Osten. "Vot iss vit' us to do?"

"The Rorvan," said Avery slowly, "were quite unhappy at the thought of our following them by air. I don't know why—it could be a taboo of some sort, or more probably they just don't trust us not to throw bombs down on their home. We're as much an unknown quantity to them as they to us, remember. If we tried to follow, I rather imagine they'd just disappear in the mountains and we might never re-establish contact. However"—he leaned forward—"there didn't seem to be any objection to some of us accompanying them on foot. In fact, they seemed anxious that we do so."

"Valking right into a trap? *Ich danke!"* Von Osten shook his head till the blond beard swirled.

"Don't be more of an ass than you can help," said Gummus-lugil. "They'd know the rest of our party could take revenge."

"Could dey, now?" Von Osten flushed and held himself in check with an effort. "How vould de oders know vere ve vere?"

“Radio, of course,” said Hamilton impatiently. “You’d take a portable transceiver along—”

“But do de aliens know ve haff radio?”

“That’s a good point,” admitted the captain. “The chances are they’ve never heard of the phenomenon. And I don’t think they should be told about it either—not till we can trust them more.”

He made a bridge of his fingers. “Mr. Avery wants to go along with them, and I agree that we should send some men. It may well be our only chance to get in touch with the native government, or whatever it is they have. To say nothing of getting a closer look at their technology and all the rest of it. After all, they may not object to humans coming here to settle. We just don’t know yet, and it’s our job to find out.

“You gentlemen here aren’t needed for the studies we’re making, your essential work has been done and you seem logical choices for the contact party. You’ll keep in touch with the camp by radio and, of course, make observations as you go along. I won’t hide the possible dangers from you. There may be diseases, poisonous snakes, or anything else you can imagine.

“And the Rorvan, not knowing that I’ll know exactly where you are, may indeed murder you. But all in all, I think it’s fairly safe for you to go. It’s strictly volunteer, of course, and no shame to the man who doesn’t wish to stick his neck out—but are you willing?”

Lorenzen wasn’t sure. He admitted to himself he was frightened, just a little, and would rather stay in camp. But what the hell—everybody else was agreeing. “Sure,” he said.

Afterward it occurred to him that the fear of being the only hold-back might have prompted all the others, too. Man was a funny animal.

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The first three or four days were not pleasure—they were pure anguish. Then muscles got used to it, and they were logging off some forty kilometers a day without undue strain. It got monotonous, just walking over a prairie that always receded into far distances. Rain didn't stop them, the humans slipped on their waterproof coveralls and the Rorvan didn't seem to mind. There were broad rivers, but all of them shallow enough to ford; and canteens could be filled there. The long-range terrestrial rifles knocked down the plentiful game at distances of a kilometer or two, and on days when no animals appeared there was always plenty of wild vegetation, stems and leaves and beans which were nourishing if tough. Gummus-lugil, who carried the transceiver, signalled back to camp every evening—a dot-dash system, to keep the Rorvan from suspecting what the radio was; Hamilton had established three triangulation robostations which kept him informed of the party's whereabouts. His own reports held nothing exciting, merely further details on what they already knew.

The Rorvan used compasses and maps to guide them, the latter in a symbology easy enough to translate once you knew what the various features were; they were hand-drawn, though that didn't mean the aliens didn't know about printing, and had a delicate touch—almost Chinese. The Mercator projection with its grid of lines and what was probably the prime meridian going straight through the south magnetic pole, suggested that they knew the true shape of the planet.

Lorenzen grew aware of the personality differences between them. Alasvu was quick-moving, impetuous, given to chattering away; Silish was the slow and stodgy type; Yanvusarran gave an impression of short temper;

Djugaz seemed the most intellectual, and worked hardest with Avery. Lorenzen tried to follow the language lessons, without much success: they had progressed beyond the elementary level where he could have caught on, though Avery said communication was still a baffling problem.

"You should teach me what you already know, Ed," urged the astronomer. "Suppose something happened to you—where'd the rest of us be?"

"At worst, you could signal the aircar to come pick you up," said Avery.

"But dammit, I'm interested!"

"O.K., O.K., I'll make up a vocabulary of the words I'm fairly certain of—but it won't help you much."

It didn't. All right, so you knew the names for grass, tree, star, run, walk, shoot, where did you go from there? Avery used to sit by the campfire at night, talking and talking with Djugaz; the ruddy light burned off his face and gleamed in the unhuman eyes of the alien, their voices rose and fell in a purr and a rumble and a whistle, their hands moved in gestures—none of it made sense to Lorenzen.

Fernandez had brought his guitar along—inevitably, groaned Gummus-lugil—and liked to play and sing in the evenings. Alasvu produced a small four-stringed harp with a resonating board that gave its notes a shivery effect, and joined him. It was comical in hear them together, Alasvu butchering *"La Cucaracha,"* or Fernandez trying to chord on the Rorvan scale. Gummus-lugil had a chessboard, and before long Silish had caught on and was giving him some competition. It was a peaceful, friendly sort of trip.

But the dark sense of its futility dogged Lorenzen. Sometimes he wished he had never come with the *Hudson*, wished he were back on Luna puttering with his instruments and photographic plates—all right, here was a new race, a different civilization, but what did it mean to man?

"We don't need more xenological data," he said to Thornton. "We need a planet."

The Martian raised his eyebrows. "Do you really think emigration will solve the population problem?" he asked. "You can't get rid of more than a few million people that way. Say a hundred million in the course of fifty years of continuous shuttle service—which somebody will have to finance, remember. New births will fill up the vacuum faster than that."

"I know," said Lorenzen. "I've been through all the arguments before. It's something more—something psychological. Just the knowledge that there is a frontier, that a man with, his back to the wall can still go make a fresh start, that any commoner has the chance to become his own boss—that'll make an enormous difference to Sol, too. It'll relieve a lot of unhealthy social pressures—change the whole attitude of man, turn it outward."

"I wonder. Don't forget, some of the most ferocious wars in history were fought while the Americas were being opened and again when the planets were being settled."

"Then isn't now. Mankind is sick of war. But he needs to find something new, something bigger than himself."

"He needs to find God," said Thornton with a certain stiffness. "The last two centuries show how the Lord chastises a people who forget him. They won't escape by going to the stars."

Lorenzen's face felt warm.

"I don't see why your kind is always embarrassed when I speak of religion," said Thornton. "I'm perfectly willing to discuss it on a reasonable basis, like any other subject."

"We'd never agree," mumbled Lorenzen. "Waste of time."

"You mean you would never listen. Well"—Thornton shrugged—"I've no great faith in all these colonization schemes, but it will be interesting to see what happens."

"I suppose...I suppose whatever comes, y-y-your Martian homes will be spared!" blurted Lorenzen.

"No. Not necessarily. The Lord may see fit to punish us, too. But we'll live. We're a survivor type."

Lorenzen had to admit he was right there. Whether you agreed with the Dissenters or not, it was undeniable that they had worked and fought like heroes for their particular dream. It was they who had seized control of the gaunt barren worn-out planet to which they had fled and made it blossom; it was their psalm-chanting armored battalions which had broken the Mongku Empire and fought Venus to a standstill. There was a vitality to the believer type which had shaken history. It was too bad that the reasonable man didn't share that devotion. But then, he wouldn't be reasonable if he did—

He looked at the loping gray form of the Rorvan. What dreams lay in those unhuman skulls? For what would they be willing to slave and kill and cheat and die?

Their planet?

Miguel Fernandez was born in that province of Latin America known as Uruguay. His family was old and wealthy, he had been one of the few who always got enough to eat. And there had been books, music, theaters, boats, horses; he had played polo for his continent in the world matches and sailed a yawl across the Atlantic. He had done good stratigraphical work on Luna and Venus, had laughed with many friends, loved many women, and gone out to the stars with a song.

He died on Troas.

It came with cruel swiftness. After two weeks of open prairie, they reached ground which rolled slowly upward, toward the dim blue forms of mountains peering over the horizon. It was a land of long coarse grasses, thick clumps of trees, coldly rushing rivers; always the wind blew, and there were many wings in the sky. Progress slowed down a bit as the Rorvan circled to find the easiest slopes, but you could still count on thirty kilometers a day or so. Avery said he'd asked how much longer the journey would take, but had not understood the answer, which seemed to be highly qualified.

The party was strung out in a long line, scrambling over tumbled boulders. There was much life around here, tetrapteri broke cover with a flurry of all four wings, smaller animals bounded off in alarm, a distant herd of horned reptiles stopped and looked at the travelers with unblinking eyes. Lorenzen was walking near the front of the line, beside Alasvu, trying to improve his Rorvanian vocabulary by pointing to new objects. He saw a small bright-colored beast lying on a rock, sunning itself—rather like an oversized lizard—and indicated it.

"Volanzu," said the Rorvan. With practice, Lorenzen was getting so he could distinguish individual phonemes; formerly, all of them had sounded much alike to him.

"No—" It seemed odd to the astronomer that Avery still didn't know the words for "yes" and "no"; maybe the language didn't include them. But—"No," he said in English, "I know that word, it means 'stone.' I mean the lizard there." He stepped up close to the animal and pointed. It arched its back and hissed at him. The double sun made a jewel-play of its iridescent scales.

Alasvu hesitated. *"Shinarran,"* he said at last, after peering closer. Lorenzen jotted it down in his notebook as he walked further.

A minute later, he heard Fernandez scream.

He whirled around. The geologist was already falling, and he saw the lizard clinging to the trouser leg. *"What the devil—"* He ran back, slipped on a rock, and got up in time to see Thornton grab the lizard by its neck and throw it to the ground and crush its head underfoot.

Then they were all crowding around Fernandez, who looked up at them out of tortured eyes. *"Hace frio—"* Thornton had slit his pants leg and they could see the fang marks and the purpling color around them.

"Poison—get that first-aid kit!" The Martian almost snarled it.

"Here—" Gently, Avery pushed him aside and knelt by Fernandez. As a psychman, he necessarily knew a good deal about medicine. His knife flashed, laying open the flesh.

Fernandez gasped. "I cannot breathe…*Madre de Dios,* I cannot breathe —"

Avery bent to put his mouth to the wound, but straightened. "No use sucking it out, if it's already got to his chest." His voice was dull.

The Rorvan crowded helplessly about, looking as if they wanted to do something but not knowing what. Fernandez's eyes rolled up and they saw the breast lie suddenly quiet.

"It's paralyzed his breathing...artificial respiration." Gummus-lugil's big hands reached out to roll the small man over.

"No." Avery was holding his pulse. "No use. His heart's stopped, too."

Lorenzen stood very still. He had never seen a man die before. There was no dignity to it. Fernandez lay grotesquely sprawled, his face mottled bluish, a little drool still coming from his mouth. The wind slipped between the crowding men and ruffled his hair. Death was an unclean sight.

Gummus-lugil fumbled for the radio on his back. "I'll call the camp. They've got means of reviving—"

"Not with this stuff in him," said Avery. "Smells like prussic acid. The speed of it—! It must be all through his bloodstream by now."

They stood quiet then, for a long time—each with his own thoughts.

Gummus-lugil called Hamilton and reported. The captain groaned. "The poor little devil! No, it's no use, we couldn't bring him back if he's been poisoned that thoroughly." It came out of the radio as a chatter of clicks. The Rorvan watched, and there was no reading their faces. Did they think it was some kind of ritual—that the humans thought a god was speaking to them?

"Ask him what to do," said Avery. "Tell him the Rorvan will still be going on and I, for one, am willing to follow them."

Decision came out of the machine: "Bury him where he is and put up a marker. I don't think his religion would frown on that, under the circumstances. Is anyone ready to give up and come back here? The car can pick them up. No? Good. Carry on, then—and for the love of man, be more careful next time!"

It took a while to dig the grave with the few tools they had. The Rorvan helped, and afterward brought rocks to make the cairn. Avery looked at Thornton. "Would you like to say a few words?" he asked, very softly.

"If you wish," said the Martian. "But he wasn't of my faith, you know, and we haven't anyone of his along. I will only say that he was a good man."

Was it hypocrisy? wondered Lorenzen. Thornton, to whom Fernandez had been an unbeliever; Gummus-lugil, who had cursed him for his noisiness; von Osten, who had called him a weakling and a fool; Avery, to whom Fernandez had only been one more factor to stabilize; he himself, who had never been particularly close to the man; even the Rorvan—here they stood around the grave, unspeaking save to voice a sense of loss. Was it only a meaningless form, or was it some recognition of the awesome stillness and the common destiny of all life? There was nothing more they could do for the dead flesh down under those rocks; did they wish they had done more while it lived?

By the time they were through, it was too late to travel farther. They gathered dead branches, cut the sere grasses and bushes for a campfire, ate their evening meal and sat very quietly.

Djugaz and Avery went on with their language studies; von Osten rolled over and went grumpily to sleep; Thornton read his Bible by the dim red flicker of light; the other Rorvan murmured to each other, no more than a whisper. The fire crackled loudly; outside its wavering circle of light, you could see the moonlit world, and hear the wind talking in the trees. Now and then an animal howled, far off in the darkness, a long and lonely sound. It was not the night of Earth, not any night such as man had known—not with that double crescent huge in a cold starry heaven, not with those noises out there. A long way home, a long way for the soul of Miguel Fernandez to wander before it found the green dales of Earth.

Lorenzen murmured to himself, almost unconsciously, the ancient words of a Lyke Wake Dirge, and looked to the vague red-lit mound of the grave. Light and shadow wove across it, almost it seemed to stir, as if the one within had loved life too much to lie quiet now.

This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
Every nighte and alle,
Fire, and sleet, and candle-lighte,
And Christe receive thye saule.

(And in the north lay eternal winter, the moon like icy rain on its glintering snows, the stars high and chill above the blinking glaciers, between the weird pale flimmers of aurora.)

When thou from hence away art paste,
Every nighte and alle,
To Whinny-Muir thou comest at laste;
And Christe receive thye saule.
If ever thou gavest hosen and shoon,
Every nighte and alle,
Sit thee down and put them on;
And Christe receive thye saule.
If hosen and shoon thou ne’er gavest nane,
Every nighte and alle,

The whinnes sall pricke thee to the bare bane;
    And Christe receive thye saule.

(What have we ever given each other, of kindness and help and love, in all the long nights of man? What can we ever give each other?)

Gummus-lugil moved over and sat heavily down beside him. “One down,” he murmured. The weaving light etched the strong thrust of his face against darkness. “How many more?”

“It was the little things Hamilton was afraid of,” said Lorenzen. “Not earthquakes and monsters and big-brained octopi, but the snakes and germs and poison plants. And he was right.”

“A thing with cyanide in its fangs—what kind of metabolism is that? Can’t have blood like we do.” The engineer shivered. “It’s cold tonight.”

“It can be licked,” said Lorenzen. “If that’s all we have to fear, it isn’t much.”

“Oh, sure, sure. I’ve seen worse than this. It was just so—sudden. Why, you almost touched that thing yourself. I saw you.”

“Yes—” Lorenzen felt sweat at the thought.

It struck him then. Alasvu had not warned him.

He held himself quiet, admitting the realization piece by piece into his mind, not daring to let it burst in all at once. Alasvu the Rorvan had not pulled him back from the lizard.

He looked across the fire to the small group of the aliens. They were in shadow, only their eyes glowing out of darkness. What were they thinking? What had they planned for these strangers from beyond the stars?

He wanted to tell Avery…no, let it ride for now. It could have been an accident. Maybe the lizards were rare, maybe this group of Rorvan had never seen one before either. Alasvu himself had been within centimeters of the fangs. The aliens couldn't be so stupid as to think they could murder every one of the humans and make it look like an accident!

But the *Da Gama* had never come home—

He forced down a shudder. He was tired, overwrought, his suspicions were childish and he knew Avery would label them as such. And if he told von Osten, the German would probably want to shoot all the Rorvan on the spot. Gummus-lugil and Thornton—well, not just yet, let him think and gather evidence before making a fool of himself.

He looked out into the western darkness. That was the way they were heading, into the mountains, into canyons and gorges and up thin slippery trails where anything could happen. And they couldn't turn back, not now, though they had no dimmest idea of what might be waiting for them.

From Whinny-Muir when thou mayst passe,
    Every nighte and alle,
To Brigg o' Dread thou comest at laste,
    And Christe receive thye saule.

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The land climbed rapidly, until they were scrambling through a wilderness of harsh rocky hills, between gaunt patches of shrub, and across brawling rivers whose cold was like teeth in their feet. It was hard to follow the Rorvan, their light graceful forms wove and bounded over the tumbled country; Lorenzen's breath was often dry in his throat as he gasped after them.

One evening, about a week after Fernandez's death, Hamilton's question clicked over the radio: "What is wrong with your guides, anyway? You're arcing north again. Why haven't they led you straight to their home?"

Gummus-lugil looked surprised, but shouted the question to Avery. "Ask one of those hairy brutes why, will you? I'm sick of walking, myself."

"I have," said the psychman. "Didn't I tell you? But the answer seems to be another of those untranslatable things. I got an impression of dangerous territory which we have to skirt."

Gummus-lugil passed the reply on to Hamilton, who closed his sending with a click that might almost have been a grunt. The Turk sighed. "Not much we can do about it" he said.

Thornton chuckled. "Perhaps they mean to run us bowlegged and thus have us helpless," he suggested.

Von Osten clapped a hand to his rifle, "Dey lead us straight or—"

"No, take it easy, will you? "Avery spread his hands. "There isn't much we can do about it, I'm afraid. They *are* the guides."

Lorenzen scowled. It didn't ring true. More and more, the whole business was looking questionable.

He pulled out an aerial map of the territory and studied it for a long while. As far as he could see, there was nothing to distinguish the area which they were avoiding. Of course, there might be hostile tribes or something, but—

For every question he could raise, there was an answer. But all the answers were too *ad hoc,* they didn't fit into a consistent picture. All right, the poison lizard had been a species unfamiliar to the Rorvan, that much was pretty obvious; but why was it new to them? Any animal that formidable ought to have a pretty wide distribution—nor had the Rorvan come so terribly far from what seemed to be their own stamping grounds. Yes, the native language might be extremely difficult, but blast it!—a society, to be capable of the technology the Rorvan seemed to have, *had* to think and speak in terms which fitted the necessary concepts. When Western science was introduced to the Orient, the Chinese had generally talked and written about it in English or French; their own tongue wasn't suitable. So the Rorvan speech ought to have some structural similarity to the Indo-European group, enough so that Avery shouldn't be having all the trouble he claimed to be having.

For that matter, he was holding long conversations with Djugaz every night. He *said* they were language lessons, but-—

Suppose they weren't?

Lorenzen sat quietly, letting the thought seep into his consciousness. He wanted to reject it. He liked Avery; and there was so little they could trust on this new world that if they couldn't even rely on each other—He must be getting paranoid.

Then there was still the *Da Gama,* a giant question mark floating somewhere out in space.

He lay in his sleeping bag, feeling the hardness of the ground beneath it, listening to the wind and the rushing river and the hooting of some unknown animal. His body was tired, but there were too many questions boiling up in his head for him to sleep. What had happened to the first expedition? Who had tried to sabotage the second? Why had it had such a heartbreaking series of minor difficulties before getting started? Why had

Avery failed to mold its personnel into a unified team? Ill-assorted as they were (why?), it should still have been easy for a skilled psychman. Why were the Rorvan the only mammalian species encountered so far? Why didn't any of their artifacts show from the air? Why did they have such an incomprehensible language? Or did they? If not, why was Avery lying? Why had the Rorvan failed to recognize a danger which should be as well-known as a cobra on Earth? Their metabolism was enough like man's so that it should be a menace to them, too. Why were they doubling the length of the journey to their home? Why, why, why?

For every question there was an answer, either given direct by Avery or advanceable as a plausible hypothesis. But, taken *in toto*, the answers violated Occam's principle; each explanation required a new entity, a new set of postulated circumstances. Wasn't there any unifying fact which would account for it all? Or was the whole thing really a jumbled mess of coincidences?

Silish was on guard, prowling around and around the dying fire. He was a noiseless flitting shadow, only the faint gleam of light on his eyes and his musket to give him away. Now and then he would look over the sleepers—and what was he thinking? What was he planning? He might hunt and sing and play chess with the humans, but they were more alien to him than the bacteria in his bloodstream. Did he really feel any sense of kinship, or was he party to some monstrous scheme which had already swallowed one ship and killed a man of the second?

Avery might not be lying, at that. He was a trustful, friendly little cuss. A psychman should know better, but then, he wasn't dealing with humans. Maybe the Rorvan had blinkered his eyes for some purpose of their own. Or had he been bribed somehow? But what could they buy him with?

Lorenzen turned, hungering for sleep. It wouldn't come. He had too much to think about, too much to be afraid of.

Resolution came at last. He couldn't tell anyone else what he suspected, not yet. There wasn't enough privacy in the group. No telling—maybe the Rorvan had picked up some English. Anyway, he had no proof, nothing but a hunch. *Take it easy, take it very slow and easy.*

But he had the beginnings of a Rorvan vocabulary. Suppose, without telling anyone, he tried to learn more. Mathematical analyses of data were out—he'd be seen performing those, except for what he could do in his head. But if you assumed that the language was basically inflected, its structure not too unlike the Aryan—by listening in on conversations, he could recognize words he knew and get some of the conjugations and declensions; new words would come from context. It wouldn't be easy, it would take time, but maybe he could do it. A lot of words could be learned by just asking, if they didn't suspect he was on the trail.

Eventually he was able to doze off.

-12-

"It iss murder, I say!"

The wind whined about von Osten's words, blowing them raggedly from his beard. He stamped cold feet, and the ringing rock gave the noise back.

Around him and Thornton, mountains climbed steeply toward an ice-blue sky, their peaks sharp and white against it, their lower slopes tumbling in a dark cruelty of rock down into a gorge and a remote hurrying river. The land had climbed terrifically in the last few days, a great block of stone thrust up between the plains and the sea. Waking in the mornings, the travelers would find a thin layer of snow on the barren ground, and their breath smoked white from their nostrils. Hunting was poor, and some days there was little enough to eat; progress was a slow scramble over cliffs and crags, down and up knifelike ravines. It had been agreed to make camp for a couple of days and devote the time to foraging—getting enough food for the last push over the pass that lay white before them.

Thornton hefted his rifle and met the German's angry gaze with steady eyes. "The Rorvan could hardly have known that lizard would be right in our path," he said.

"No, but it vas a chance for dem to get rid of vun of us." Von Osten hunched his shoulders under the inadequate jacket. "Iss too many t'ings vat don't fit togedder. Dere iss somet'ing fake about dese aliens, and I say ve should shoot down all but vun and beat de trut' out of him."

"Matter of language difficulty there," said Thornton dryly.

"Lengvitch, hah! Dey just don't vant us able to talk vit' dem. No lengvitch can be so hard like dey make out. Ven dey don't vant to answer a qvestion, dey just tell soft-head Avery, '*Versteh nicht,*' or dey jabber nonsense at him and he t'inks it iss some new trick of deir lengvitch. No, dey talk to him eassy enough if ve make dem vant to."

Von Osten reached out and tapped the Martian's bony chest. "And vy are dey leading us like dey do? I haff looked at our own maps. Vould be much qvicker and eassier to cross fart'er sout' and den follow de coastal lowlands nort. I t'ink dis talk about skirting dangerous land iss so much bull roar. I t'ink dey are giffing us a royal runaround."

Thornton shrugged. "Frankly, I suspect the same. But why approach me about it?"

"You iss de only vun I can trust. Avery iss a fool, Lorenzen iss a veakling, Gummus-lugil vould refuse to help just because it iss my idea. You and I can maybe do somet'ing."

"Hm-m-m" Thornton rubbed his chin; the unshaven bristles felt scratchy. "Perhaps I can. But I don't want to rush into anything. Quite possibly the Rorvan intend to murder all of us. It is the easiest way to keep man off their planet. If the *Hudson* also fails to return, there will probably be no third expedition, and maybe the aliens suspect as much. But don't forget, they have to get rid of base camp too, which would be doubly alert if all of us disappeared. And the spaceship—how about it? How did they dispose of the *Da Gama*? It should have been in its orbit to this day, even if they lured the skeleton crew down somehow—"

Von Osten scowled. "I t'ink dey haff powers dey are not showing us. Maybe spaceships of deir own."

"While their warriors are armed with flintlocks? Don't be a fool!"

The German's sun-darkened face turned red. After a moment, he said quietly: "Pleasse vatch your tongue. I vish to vork togedder vit' you, but not if you haff no manners. Haff you neffer t'ought maybe dose muskets are part of de game? If ve t'ought dey had not'ing better, it vould put us off our guard—"

Thornton whistled. Suddenly he turned. "Come on, we're supposed to be hunting."

"But my idea?"

"I want to think about it. I'll let you know."

They felt their way cautiously along the ledge that wound up the mountain face. Now and then they stopped to scan the harsh scene with field glasses. Dry snow scudded along the crags, but there was no sign of life. Thornton felt hunger gnawing in his belly, and suppressed the awareness. He had no business now complaining about the flesh.

If the Rorvan were *not* so primitive as they claimed to be, it opened up a whirl of nasty possibilities. If they were anywhere near the interplanetary level of technology, they would have been able to detect the *Hudson* as she approached; and in her equatorial orbit, she would make such frequent transits of Sister and the suns that the smallest telescope could spot her. Even if the Rorvan were only at the gunpowder stage, it was probable that they had telescopes. But if they were further along yet—then they could live underground, synthesizing their food; the custom might have grown up during a period of atomic wars. They could wipe out the camp and the ship with a couple of long-range guided missiles. Why hadn't they done so before? Maybe they wished to learn all they could first, and appearing in the guise of primitives was certainly a good way to disarm suspicion.

Thornton shook his head. It still didn't quite make sense, there were too many loose ends and unanswerable questions. But he had to assume von Osten was essentially right. He dared not do otherwise. And if so—what to do? A quick blast with an automatic rifle, to wipe out the Rorvan in camp; maybe saving one for questioning—the commissars had taught humanity how to get truth out of any creature which could feel pain. A call to the camp, a quick return of all personnel to the *Hudson*, retreat into outer space—And then what? Troas would still be a mystery. He couldn't see Solar Patrol making up a punitive force—but it would have to. It couldn't refrain, lest some day the Rorvan strike out of the sky at Earth.

Avery would scream to high heaven pointing out that this was sheer unprovoked murder; he would doubtless lodge criminal charges when they got back to Sol. Lorenzen would, somewhat reluctantly, back him. Gummus-lugil was an uncertain quantity. How about Hamilton? The captain might put Thornton and von Osten in irons and stay here regardless; his caution never stood in the way of his duty he saw it.

I have a duty, too.

It might be best to stage a mutiny, to gun down all those humans who would not string along. And that would certainly mean a trial when they got back to Sol, prison, psychiatrists turning his mind inside out—Thornton's wife and children would weep, alone in their home on Mars and bear themselves with bitter pride in the face of their neighbors.

But the Rorvan were not human; the Noachian clergy doubted that any aliens even had souls, and in all events they were surely heathen.

Thornton knew what an anguished wrestling with himself he must have before decision came. But already he thought he knew what the decision would be.

"Dere! Ofer dere!"

Thornton lifted the field glasses at Von Osten's whisper. High above them, peering over a massive jut of rock, was a horned head—game!

The two rifles cracked almost as one. The beast screamed and was gone. Furiously, Thornton began to run, leaping over stones and splits in the ledge. His breathing was fire in his lungs, but he had to catch that animal before it got away, he had to!

The upper ridge bulked in front of him. He scrabbled, clawing himself fast to the rock. Von Osten grunted at his side, grabbing for handholds. It was like going over a fence. They reached the top.

And went over!

The moment was too swift for understanding. Thornton had a brief wild knowledge of falling, something smote him on the back and ripped his flesh open, he heard the angry whizz of a loose rock going past his ear, and then thunder and darkness came.

He awoke slowly, for a long time he was only aware of pain. Then vision cleared and he sat up, holding a head that seemed ready to split. “Von Osten,” he groaned.

The German was already on his feet, looking dismayfully about him. “You iss all right?” he asked. His tone was perfunctory, he had checked the unconscious Martian and found nothing serious.

Thornton felt himself. There was a long shallow cut in his back, his head was painful and bleeding from the nose, and there were more bruises than he cared to count. But—“Yes, I think so.”

Von Osten helped him to his feet. “Iss a curse on dis planet,” he snarled. “It iss here only to murder men. I t’ink ve are caught in here.”

Thornton looked around. The bluff they had climbed was the outer wall of a sort of pothole, about six meters deep and four wide; the animal they had shot had been on the farther side of it, and by sheer ill luck they had gone over the bluff at exactly the wrong spot. The walls of the pit were nearly vertical, worn smooth by centuries of wind and frost and melting snow; a small hole in the bottom must lead to a channel that drained off the water.

He walked unsteadily about, examining the edges of the trap. Von Osten, who had suffered less, made several increasingly frantic attempts to climb out, but finally gave up. There was no way to do it without equipment they didn’t have.

“Two more for de Rorvan,” he said hoarsely.

“They couldn’t have known—”

"Dey haff led us t'rough dangerous country. Chance has done for dem vat dey oddervise vould haff done for demselves."

Thornton went to his knees and prayed. He didn't ask for help; whether he lived or died, that was God's will. He felt more composed when he was through.

"The others will come looking for us when we don't return tonight," he said. "They know approximately the route we followed."

"Ja, but iss a hell of a big territory to search, and ve vill not last very long in dis cold." Von Osten hugged himself and shivered.

"We'll have to fire shots at intervals, and take our chances of starting an avalanche. But we may as well wait a while with that, nobody will be coming this way for hours yet. Here, break out the first-aid kit and bandage me a little, will you?"

After that there was nothing to do but wait.

It grew colder when the blue sun set. Shadows began to fill the pit, and the air was like liquid. There was no breeze down here, but the men could hear the thin cold harrying of the wind up around the edge of the hole. They tried to exercise to keep warm, but there was no strength in them.

After the second sunset, they huddled together in an abysm of darkness, under the keen merciless blink of stars. Now and then they dozed, and woke with a shudder. They were only half conscious, time stretched horribly for them and the night was full of fleeting visions. Once Thornton thought he heard someone calling him, and started nearly awake; the voice rang hollowly down the long bare slopes, crying that he had sinned, and he knew it was not one of the searchers.

The long night wore on. When the first stealthy gray slipped across their little patch of heaven, they felt a dim surprise that they were still alive.

Now and then they curled stiff fingers around their guns and fired into the air. The echoes howled around them, and Thornton recalled the topography of this region with an effort. It was hard to think, but he suspected the surrounding cliffs would prevent sound from carrying very far. They might never be found, their bones might lie here till the double star was ashen.

The first sun climbed higher. They couldn't see it yet, but it melted the night's frost and a dozen bitter trickles of water ran down into the pit. Von Osten rubbed a frozen toe, trying to bring life back to it. Thornton sought to pray, but words wouldn't come, it was as if God had forgotten him.

Full sunlight was blazing into the pit when the Rorvan came. Thornton saw them peering over the edge and didn't recognize them at first, his mind was vague and stupid. Then knowledge came and he snapped to wakefulness with a jerk.

Von Osten spat an oath and hefted his rifle. *"Mörderische Hund!"* Thornton knocked the weapon down just in time.

"You idiot! They're here to rescue us!"

"Are dey, now? Dey're here to see ve die!"

"And what good will it do us to shoot them? Give me that gun!" They scuffled feebly. Three Rorvan stood on the pit's edge and watched them. Wind ruffled their fur, but the masked faces were utterly impassive and they said nothing.

Thornton got the rifle away from von Osten and looked up again. There was no sign of the aliens. It was like a cold hand around his heart. So simple, so easy. If the Rorvan meant them all to die, here were two men murdered for them already. They need only report that they had found no trace of the missing ones.

So easy, so easy—Thornton felt his mind buckling. He felt death within himself, he was doomed to freeze and die here, thirty thousand lightyears from his home, and God had turned his face from Joab Thornton. He bowed his head, feeling tears harsh in his eyes. “Thy will be done.”

And then the Rorvan were in sight again. They had a rope, and one of them took a turn around his body and the other was climbing down it into the pit. Down to rescue the humans.

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Beyond the pass, there was another steep drop, cliffs falling terrifically into a remote glimmering sea. It reminded Lorenzen of parts of the California coast—the savage splendor of mountains, the grass and shrubs and low dark-leaved trees along their slopes, the broad white beach far below; but this range was bigger and sharper. Newer—he remembered Fernandez pointing out that the glacial era on Troas was due to a recent period of tectonic activity. The huge satellite probably made diastrophism here a more rapid process than on Earth. Lorenzen thought of the little geologist and his grave. He missed Miguel.

A good thing that Thornton and von Osten had been saved. He remembered a long talk he had had with the Martian afterward; Thornton had told of his plans, in short harsh sentences wrenched out by an inner need to confess to someone, and admitted he had been wrong. For if the Rorvan intended murder, why should they have rescued him? Lorenzen said nothing to anyone else about the conversation, but added the question to his own list.

Von Osten was still sullen and hostile to the aliens, but had obviously shelved his own schemes. Thornton, shaken by his experience, had swung the other way, to a trust of the Rorvan almost as great as Avery's seemed to be. The Martian was now brooding over the theological problem of whether or not they had souls; he felt they did, but how to prove it? Gummus-lugil slogged cheerfully and profanely along the interminable trail. Lorenzen felt very lonely these days.

He was making progress with the language. He could almost follow the talk of Avery and Djugaz, nearly enough to be sure that it was not just a lesson. The psychman remained blandly smiling, turning all questions with a deftness that left Lorenzen stuttering and incoherent. Yes, of course he was getting along with Djugaz, and the Rorvan was telling him some interesting things about his own race. No, he didn't want to take time out and teach Lorenzen what he knew; later, John, later, when we can all relax.

Almost, Lorenzen was ready to lay down the burden. Give it up, take Avery's word at face value, stop thinking and worrying and being afraid. There would be an answer to all questions in due time. It was no concern of his—

He stiffened himself and bent bleakly to the job. It did not occur to him how much he was changing himself, how little stubborn and aggressive he had been before this. Apart from his research, he had been like most men, content to let others do his thinking and deciding for him; he could never quite go back to that.

The climb down to the sea was grueling, but took only a couple of days. Once they were on the flat coastline, it was like a vacation. Avery said Djugaz had told him it was only a few more days to their goal.

At this point of the shoreline, the coastal plain hardly deserved that title: it narrowed to a kilometer-wide beach, a thin strip of grass and trees, and then the high rocky bluffs at the sheer foot of the mountain. The strand was also Californian, a great stretch of fine sand piled into tall dunes and scudding before the salt wind. But Earth had never seen a surf as furious as that which foamed and roared at its edge, nor a tide so swift and deep as the one which marched up almost the whole width of the beach twice a day. There didn't seem to be any game here, but the party could live off herbs and wild beans for a while.

Lorenzen felt a tautness rising within him as the kilometers fell behind. A few more days, and then—the answer? Or more questions?

Death guested them again before they reached an end of wandering.

The tide was coming in near the first sunset that day, when they came to a point where the hills fell directly into the sea. Bluffs and wind-gnawed boulders lay half-buried in the sand, making a low wall across their path; beyond, the beach curved inward, a long narrow loop at the foot of a ten-meter cliff, forming a bay. The water here was scored with the teeth of rocks thrusting out of its surface; a kilometer from the beach, the mouth of the bay was white violence where the sea thundered against a line of skerries.

Lorenzen paused on the top of the wall, looking uneasily ahead at the thin strip of sand. "That stuff is under water at high tide," he said. "And the tide's coming in."

"Not that fast," said Gummus-lugil. "It'll take less than half an hour to get across, and we won't even get our feet wet. Come on!" He jumped back down to the strand, and Lorenzen shrugged and followed. The Rorvan were already ahead of them, moving with the light rippling grace which had grown familiar in these weeks.

They were halfway across, hugging the foot of the cliff, when the sea broke in.

Lorenzen saw it as a sudden white curtain rising over the barrier. The roll of surf became a rising cannonade, ringing and screaming between the stones. He sprang back as the water level rose and rushed in across the beach.

A wave toppled over the outer skerries and came in with a blinding speed. Lorenzen yelled as its teeth closed around his knees. Another was on its back, green and white fury, spray exploded in his face and the sea got him around the hips. He fell, the water sheeted over his head, he rose with a howl and a fist seemed to batter him down again.

Rising, striking out wildly, he was whirled outward by the undertow. His boots dragged at him, yanking him beneath. The waters bellowed and tossed him back, against the white rush of surf at the cliff 's edge.

Clawing for a hold in the churning water, he looked about him through half-blinded eyes. There, up ahead in the fury, a rock rising—He twisted, fighting to stay above water. Briefly, a Rorvan was whipped by him, he heard a dying scream and then the sea snarled up to shake the world and he went under again.

Up...over...strike, kick, reach—The slippery stone would not take his hands. A wave grabbed him and dashed him away—then back, over the rock, he closed his arms around something and hung on.

The waters whooshed about him, he couldn't see or feel or think, he clung where he was and lay blind, deaf, dumb, half dead, only a barnacle will to survive kept him there.

And then it was over, the wrathful waters sucked back with a huge hollow roar. He fell waist-deep and scrambled for the wall cutting off the bay. Before he got there, the sea was coming in again, but he made it. A wave sloshed after him as he climbed the wall. Almost hysterically, he fled from it, collapsing on the grass above high-water mark. He lay there for a long time.

Presently strength and sanity returned. He got up and looked around him. The wind tossed smoking spindrift into his face, and the noise of the sea drowned his voice. But there were others, a group gathered, they stood mutely together and looked with wildness at each other. Human and Rorvan eyes met in a common horror.

Slowly, then, they took stock. Three missing—Gummus-lugil, Alasvu, Yanvusarran. Silish groaned, it sounded like the anguish of a man. Lorenzen felt sick.

"Let's look around." Avery had to speak loud, but it came to their ears as a whisper under the anger of the sea. "They may be...alive...somewhere."

The tidal bore was receding, and von Osten climbed the wall and peered over the bay. Two forms stood on the opposite side and waved feebly at him. The German whooped. "Gummus-lugil and vun oder iss still alife! Dey lived!"

Silish narrowed his eyes, squinting across the sunset blaze that shone off the waters. *"Yu Yanvusarran."* His head drooped.

"What did it?" breathed Avery. "What was it that hit us?"

"The p-p-place here is a ro-o-ost," stuttered Lorenzen. "The c-conformation of the bay, a s-s-steep slope of the bottom...it makes th-th-the tide come in like all the legions of hell. We've got s-similar things on Earth...and here the t-t-tide is so much stronger—I-i-i-if we'd only known!"

"De Rorvan!" Von Osten's lips were white. "Dey knew! It vas a plan to kill us all—"

"D-don't be more of a fool than y-y-you can help," said Lorenzen. "It got one of them and nearly got the rest. It was an accident."

Von Osten looked at him in surprise, but shut up.

The tide dropped swiftly. They crossed the bay by twilight, to join Gummus-lugil and Alasvu. The Rorvan was collecting driftwood for a campfire, and the Turk was reporting the affair on his miraculously undamaged radio. There was no sign of Yanvusarran, he must have been swept out to sea, or maybe his corpse rolled at the foot of the barrier reef and waited for the fish.

The Rorvan set up a low keening. They stood in a line, holding their hands out to the water. Lorenzen listened to the funeral chant, and was able to translate most of it. *"He is gone, he is faded, he walks no more, no longer for him the winds and the light, but his* (memory?) *shall live within us*—" Their grief was genuine enough, thought the astronomer.

Darkness came, walling in the little circle of firelight. Most of the party slept, exhausted; one Rorvan guard prowled up and down, and Avery and Djugaz were sitting up talking as usual. Lorenzen stretched himself out near them and feigned sleep. Maybe tonight, he thought, he would get a clue. He hadn't been able to make much sense out of their talk before, but sometime soon he must catch on to the knack, and then his vocabulary would be large enough—

He had it!

Avery spoke, slowly and heavily: "I (unknown) not make-think others. Some not (unknown) laughing (?) with what I-say."

The trick was to cast what was heard into normal English, filling in the meanings of unfamiliar words from context, and to make the translation fast enough so that he didn't lose the reply. "I hope this does not make the others think (or: suspicious). Some are already not very happy with what I tell them."

Djugaz answered gravely: "Swiftly (unknown) theirs you, (unknown) time (?) to *Zurla* we-get see past shadow (?) they." Lorenzen's mind raced, unnaturally clear: "You must swiftly disarm their suspicions, lest when we get to the *Zurla* they see past the shadow (or: deception)."

"I do not think they will. How could they? And after all, I have the weight of authority (?), they will listen to me. At worst (?), that can be done to them which was done to the first expedition (?), but I hope (?) that will not be necessary. It is not a pleasant thing to do."

A harsh flare of fanaticism: "If we must, then we must. There are larger issues (?) at stake than a few lives."

Avery sighed and rubbed his eyes like a man driven to immense weariness. "I know. There is no turning back. Even you do not realize how much is involved (?)." He looked up at the high cold radiance of the stars. "Perhaps (?) all of that—the entire universe (?)—all time and all space." There was a croak of pain in his voice. "It is too much for one man!"

"You must."

"Sometimes I am afraid—"

"I, too. But it is more than our lives (?)."

Avery laughed without humor. *"You* think this is an enormous issue! I tell you, Djugaz, you do not begin to understand how much—"

"Perhaps not." Coldly: "But you depend (?) on me as much as I on you—possibly more. You will follow my lead (?) in this."

“Yes. Yes, I will.”

Lorenzen could not follow the rest of the talk; it went into generalities, abstract concepts for which he had no word. But he’d heard enough! He lay in the sleeping bag and felt cold.

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The mountain range swung suddenly inland, at the same time growing lower and gaining an easier slope. Here there were rolling grasslands, trees and meadows and running streams between the hills. The Rorvan hastened their steps.

Another of their race, armed and dressed much like themselves, met them. There were whistling cries of recognition; Djugaz and Silish ran up to him and conferred swiftly, then the newcomer nodded and ran off.

“He’s going to spread the news,” said Avery after a talk with Djugaz. “The village will want to welcome us. They’re a pretty friendly people, these Rorvan.”

“Hm-m-m.” Gummus-lugil gave him a close look. “You seem to be kind of familiar with their language after all.”

“Yes. In the last few days, I finally got the key to it, and everything fell together all at once. Fascinating semantics it’s got. I’m still not an expert by any means, but I can understand ordinary conversation.”

“So? Who are these boys with us, then?”

“They were a delegation to another town, returning home after a… business conference of some sort; I can’t quite get the exact meaning there. They happened on us and realized pretty quickly what we must be. Their knowledge of astronomy is good, about like our eighteenth century, and Djugaz quickly grasped what I told him about the true structure of the universe—its size and so on.”

Lorenzen couldn’t refrain from asking: “Where are their observatories? How did they detect the finite speed of light? They could hardly use Romer’s method in this system and—”

“I don’t know yet.” Avery looked annoyed. “Don’t be so dogmatic, John. Does every science have to develop the same way ours did?”

Lorenzen shut up. No sense giving himself away. No! It could mean a knife between his ribs.

“Underground towns, as we suspected earlier,” went on Avery. “That custom seems to have grown up in the past couple of thousand years, when the climate was colder than it is now. Originally, I suppose, it was merely because a dugout requires less building material and is easier to heat, but now it’s become almost a matter of morality, like our taboo on public nudity.”

“And dey haff farms underground, too?” Von Osten frowned, trying to understand.

“No, they never developed agriculture—so much of the wild vegetation is edible the year around. Then, too, they have herds of grazing animals for meat, induced to remain in the vicinity by some means I don’t yet comprehend. Djugaz gave me the word for it, but I can’t find a corresponding concept in any human language.”

Alasvu was listening to the talk, his head cocked on one side, as if he knew what was being said. Doubtless he had the drift of it, thought Lorenzen. There was a wicked mirth in the amber eyes.

“It’s wonderful that they were still able to become civilized,” said Thornton. “A gifted race—Do you know how many of them there are?”

"Quite a large population, I gather—at least a hundred million, though none of our party knew the exact figure. This is just a small village, a hamlet, we're going to; but then, they don't have any really big cities like us, they spread out more uniformly."

Lorenzen looked at the psychman. The weeks of wandering had leaned him down and burned his skin dark, but still there was nothing impressive to look at, still he was a small round man approaching middle age, soft-spoken, genial, everything about him said he was dull but steady, mildly benevolent, a little timid—And he was party to a scheme which juggled with the destiny of stars! There was some goal which made him so ruthless that the fate of two ships and the will of seven billion human beings was nothing. Lorenzen shrank a little closer to the stolid, comforting bulk of Gummus-lugil. He'd just about have to let the Turk know, if no one else—

One of the mountains hemming in the eastern horizon thrust long roots out toward the sea. As the party approached one of these, it appeared as a low escarpment fronting a giant hill. The surrounding land was bare, tracked and trampled by many feet. Trees grew thickly before the cliff, some of them ancients almost three meters tall, and out of this grove the Rorvan began coming.

They moved quietly, saying little, none of the babbling excitement a human crowd would have shown. There must be some fifty or sixty of them, estimated Lorenzen, equally divided between male and female. The latter were dressed in kilts and sandals; the four breasts were not very human-looking, but gave the final proof that this race was mammalian. Some of the males carried muskets, the rest were unarmed. They closed in on the humans, in a friendly enough way. A purr of talk rose from them.

"How come no young?" asked Thornton.

Avery put the question to Djugaz, and replied after a moment: "The children all go into special…creches, I guess you'd call them. I gather the family here has a radically different structure and function from ours."

Pushing through the grove, the throng came to an entrance in the hill—a great artificial doorway, ten meters wide and three high. Lorenzen forced down a shudder as he walked through it—would he ever see sunlight again?

Thick columns of rammed earth supported a broad corridor running into the hill with many branches leading off to the sides. The air was cool and fresh, Lorenzen saw ventilator grilles in the walls. "Good pumps, then," commented Gummus-lugil. "And they use electricity." He nodded at the fluorescent tubes which lined walls and ceiling and gave a steady bluish light. "Their technology can't be entirely on an eighteenth-century level."

"You wouldn't expect it to be," said Avery. "A lot of engineering advance in our own history has been sheer accident. If the early researchers had investigated the Crookes tube more thoroughly, we might have had radio and radar before 1900."

The corridor was quiet, save for the murmur of the air blowers and the shuffle of many feet. It sloped gently downward for a good half kilometer. Glancing in the side tunnels, Lorenzen saw doorways presumably leading into rooms or suites.

The main passage opened on a great cubical cavern. This was lined with entrances screened off by tapestries that seemed to be of woven fiber. "Downtown," said Avery with a wry smile.

"They don't seem to have much artistic sense," said Lorenzen dubiously. The whole place had a depressingly barren air to it, neat and clean but without sign of decoration.

Djugaz said something and Avery translated: “This is quite a new settlement. They haven’t had time to fix it up yet. It’s partly a colony, partly a military post; I gather that the females fight as well as the males.”

“So dey are not united here?” rumbled von Osten.

“No, not quite. I’ve already learned that the continent is divided among several nations. Currently they’re at peace and cooperating, but it wasn’t so long ago that they had a terrific series of wars and the armies are still maintained at strength.”

The German’s eyes gleamed. “Dey could maybe be played off against each oder.”

“I doubt it—even if we would be morally justified in such a course,” said Avery. “I rather imagine they know as much about the *divide et impera* game as we do.”

One of the Rorvan made gestures at a pair of doorways, talking fast. “We’re honored guests,” said the psychman. “We’re invited to make ourselves at home here.”

Inside, the apartments had the same bleak military look: each had two rooms and bath, furnished with a few low concrete couches and stools; that was obviously an easier material to work with than the native wood. But there was hot and cold running water, a flush system, a kind of soap. Apparently the village had a communal kitchen.

Avery disappeared for a while, talking with Djugaz and the villagers who seemed to be local leaders. Von Osten looked around the suite in which the other humans waited, and sighed gustily. “Iss dis all ve haff come so far to see?”

"I'd like more of a look," said Thornton. "Their apparatus, the general layout of the town, their daily lives—it should be interesting."

The German grunted and sat down. "To you, maybe. For me, I haff come t'irty t'ousand lightyears and seen not'ing vort' de trip. Not efen a good fight at its end."

Gummus-lugil took out his pipe and got it going. His face was moody. "Yeh. I have to agree. Unless these Rorvan will actually let us settle here, the trip has been for nothing. We can't take over a planet from a hundred million well-armed natives with a high grasp of military principles. They could raise merry hell with us, just using what they have, and I'll bet they could soon be copying our own weapons, too. Unless we could bluff them…but no…the bluff wouldn't last, they'd catch on fast enough and massacre the colonists."

"Dey could be conquered!"

"At what expense? Spending how many lives? And all for the benefit of the few million people who could be shipped here! They don't command that many votes! Parliament would never agree."

"Well…the Rorvan may still be persuaded—" Thornton said it as if he didn't believe it himself. Nobody did. A race capable of building electric generators wasn't so stupid that it would allow several million aggressive aliens to settle on its home world. It could easily foresee the consequences.

Avery came back after an hour or so. He was wearing a poker face, but his voice sounded tired: "I've been talking with the local bosses, and gotten messages sent to the government of this nation—they have a few telegraph lines, it's something new for them. That government will doubtless communicate with the others. We're asked to stick around for a while till they can send their scientists and so on to interview us."

"What's the chance of their letting people settle here?" asked Gummus-lugil.

Avery shrugged. "What do you think? It'll have to be officially decided, of course, but you already know the answer as well as I."

"Yeh. I guess I do." The engineer turned away. His shoulders slumped.

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The rest of the day was spent in a guided tour of the village. There was quite a bit to see. Gummus-lugil was especially interested in the power station, which he was told drew its energy from a hydroelectric plant in the mountains, and in the small but well-equipped chemical laboratory. Von Osten took a good look at the arsenal, which included some large-sized mobile cannon firing explosive shells, a set of flame throwers, grenades, and a half built experimental glider which ought to work when it was finished, Thornton leafed through some printed books and inquired, through Avery, about the state of Rorvan physics—which had apparently gotten as far as Maxwell's equations and was working on radio. Lorenzen tried hard to keep up a show of interest, and hoped he was succeeding. But every now and then one of the aliens gave him a sidelong look which might mean nothing or might mean death.

In the evening there was a banquet, the whole village gathered in a decorated mess hall for a series of excellently prepared dishes and the entertainment of musicians. The town commander made a mercifully short speech on the "hands-across-space" theme, and Avery replied in kind. Lorenzen faked boredom as well as he could, as if he didn't understand a word of it. Underneath, he was churning with worry. All that day the farce had been kept up. The Rorvan had asked the expected questions of Avery—about his race, its history, science, beliefs, intentions—well, that would fit in with the astronomer's deductions of the truth; the aliens would still have a normal curiosity about man. But why this solemn rigmarole of talks which presumably only Avery would understand? Was it for his, Lorenzen's benefit? Had Avery warned them that he might know more than he let on? And if so, how much of what he knew did Avery know he knew?

This was getting worse every minute, questions within questions. And what to do, what to do? Lorenzen glanced down the long bright table. The Rorvan were there in their Sunday best, barbaric splashes of color against the drab, soiled gray of the humans' hiking clothes—rank upon rank of them, face after face, each one mobile and smiling and completely unreadable to him. What did lie behind those golden eyes? Was he sitting at table with the real masters of the universe? Self-appointed gods playing at humble peasant and soldier—When the Rorvan smiled, you could see the long fangs in their mouths.

It ended, finally, after a polite nightmare of hours. Lorenzen was sweating when he got up, and he couldn't keep his hands from trembling. Avery gave him a look which showed only sympathy—but what was *he* thinking? Was he even human? Surgical disguise, synthetic thing—what lay under the round bland mask of Avery's face?

"You don't look well, John," said the psychman.

"I feel...rather tired," mumbled Lorenzen. "I'll be all right after a good night's sleep." He yawned elaborately.

"Yes, of course. It has been rather a long day, hasn't it? Let's toddle bedwards."

The party broke up in murmuring, soft-footed knots of aliens. A guard of honor—or was it just a plain guard?—shouldered arms and marched behind the humans on the way to their apartments. They had two adjoining ones, and Avery himself had suggested that Lorenzen and Gummus-lugil should take one, the other three the remaining one. If they were to be here several days, that was a tactful measure to avoid a clash between the Turk and von Osten, but—

"Good night, boys. See you in the morning. 'Night."

Lorenzen drew the curtain that shut his place off from the street. Inside, it was a barren cave, coldly lit by the fluoros in the ceiling. There was a great sudden quiet, this was not a human town with its restless life. Gummus-lugil spied a bottle on the table and reached for it with a delighted grin. "Some of their wine—nice of them, and I could sure use a nightcap." He pulled out the stopper with a faint *pop.*

"Gimme that...I need it bad—" Lorenzen almost had the bottle to his lips when he remembered. "No!

"Huh?" Gummus-lugil's narrow black eyes blinked at him. "All right, then, hand it over here."

"No!" Lorenzen set the bottle down with a thud. "It might be drugged."

"Huh?" repeated the engineer, "You feel O.K., John?"

"Yes." Lorenzen heard his own teeth clapping in his head. He stopped and drew a long shuddering breath. "Listen, Kemal. I've been hoping to get you alone. I want to...tell you something."

Gummus-lugil ran a hand through his coarse dark hair. His face grew wooden, but the eyes remained watchful. "Sure. Fire away."

“While I’m talking,” said Lorenzen, “you better check your pistol and rifle. Make sure they’re loaded.”

“They are. But what—” Gummus-lugil started as Lorenzen flipped the curtain aside and looked out into the street. It was empty, utterly dead and silent in the chill electric radiance. Nothing stirred, no sound, no movement, it was as if the village slept. But somewhere there must be wakeful brains, thinking and thinking.

“Look here, John, we’d better let Ed have a look at you—”

“I’m *not* sick!” Lorenzen whirled about and put his hands on the Turk’s shoulders and shoved him to the bed with a strength he hadn’t known was in him. “All I want you to do is listen to me. Then when you’ve heard me out, decide if I’m crazy or if we really are in a trap—the same trap that got the *Da Gama.*”

Gummus-lugil hardly moved, but his mouth grew suddenly tight. “Talk all you want,” he said, very quietly.

“All right. Hasn’t anything struck you about these…Rorvan? Hasn’t there been something strange about them, this whole time we’ve known them?”

“Well…well, yes, but you can’t expect nonhumans to act like—”

“Sure. Sure, there’s always been an answer, for every question we raised.” Lorenzen was pacing up and down, his fists clenching and unclenching. Oddly, in this moment his stutter had left him. “But just think over the questions again. Consider the weirdness of it all.

“The Rorvan group, traveling on foot across a huge empty plain, just *happens* to find us. Improbable, isn’t it? They are the dominant race, the intelligent one, they are mammals, and there are no other mammals on this planet. An evolutionary biologist would wonder about that. They live underground and have no agriculture, seem to make no use of the surface at all except for hunting and herb-gathering. A moral code, we're told—but no morality lasts that doesn't make *some* sense, and this one is ridiculous. Our guides fail to recognize a type of venomous lizard which is probably widely distributed and certainly a menace to them; even if they personally never saw one before, they should surely have heard about it, just as any American knows what a cobra is. Then, even worse, they get trapped by a tidal bore and lose one of their number—*within sixty kilometers of their own home!* They didn't know about the damned thing!

"I tell you, the Rorvan are fakes! They're playing a game! They're no more natives of this planet than we are!"

Silence. It was so complete a silence that Lorenzen could hear the remote humming of the village power station. Then his own heart began to beat so furiously that it drowned out all but Gummus-lugil's: "If you're right—"

"Keep your voice down! Of course I'm right! It's the only picture which fits all the facts. It explains, too, why we were taken the long way around to this place. They had to build it first! And when the 'scientists' and 'government representatives' arrive to greet us—they'll be from the Rorvan spaceship!"

Gummus-lugil shook his head, slowly and amazedly. "I never thought—"

"No. We were rushed along, with smooth, pat explanations every time we did pause to wonder. That phony language barrier helped a lot, too; we naturally shelved our questions—in our own minds as well—till they could be answered directly. It's *not* a difficult language at all. I've learned the basics of it myself, once I decided that it was not hard. When I first tried to study it, I was given a lot of confusing data—faked! There's no more variation in the name of an object, for instance, than there is in English or Turkish. Once I'd thrown out the false information—"

"But why? Why are they doing this? What do they hope to gain—"

"The planet, of course. If we go home and report that there are highly civilized natives, Earth will lose interest in Troas and their own people can come here in droves. Then it'll be too late for us, they'll *have* the planet and we won't be able to get them off it."

Gummus-lugil stood up. There was a grimness in his face; he had changed his mind about a lot of things in a few minutes. "Good work, John! I'm pretty sure you're right. But...d'you think they intend to murder us?"

"No. They rescued Joab and Friedrich, remember, whom they could just as easily have left to die. I don't think they'll kill us unless they suspect we know the truth. Our negative report at home will be of more value to them than our disappearance."

"Why—" Gummus-lugil grinned, a savage white flash of teeth in the broad swarthy face. "Then it's simple. We just string along with them till we get back to our camp and then tell—"

"But it's *not* that easy, Kemal! Avery is in cahoots with them!"

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This time the engineer said nothing, but his hand dropped to the gun at his belt as he waited.

"Avery...little old Ed Avery," said Lorenzen. There was a sick laughter in him. *"He* faked those language data. He supplied most of those answers to our questions. He learned Rorvan and sat up late at night talking with them. I heard them—" He sketched out the conversation on which he had eavesdropped.

"You mean the *Da Gama* case is…related to ours?" Gummus-lugil's voice was thick.

"It fits in, doesn't it? The first expedition disappears. The second endures a string of troubles which would have made anyone but a bunch of near-fanatics like the Institute's directors quit. The government helps recruit personnel for the trip, and we get the most badly selected, conflicting, inefficient crew which ever took a ship to space. Avery is along as psychman and does nothing to mitigate those conflicts. Avery is also in an official position, one of the advisors on whom Parliament and the people are coming to lean more and more. And when we bull through in spite of everything, the Rorvan show up. And if we come home and don't make a negative report on Troas…well, the *Da Gama* vanished—"

Sweat gleamed on their faces as they stood confronting each other. They were breathing hard, and Lorenzen was beginning to shake again.

"But the *government*—" It was almost a groan from Gummus-lugil.

"Not the official government. Parliament operates in a goldfish bowl. But the psychocrats, the advisors, the quiet unassuming power behind the throne—they have men everywhere. One Patrol ship, manned entirely by men sworn to their service, would have been enough to take care of the *Da Gama.* Will be enough for us."

"But why?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll never live to know. But you could imagine an older civilization than ours—maybe the Rorvan are the real bosses of the galaxy, maybe the psychocrats on Earth are their tools, or maybe both are cat's-paws for some other planet. They don't want man in interstellar space—"

There was another silence while they thought of a billion suns and the great cold darknesses between.

"All right," said Gummus-lugil. "What can we do? Now?"

"I don't know," said Lorenzen desolately. "Maybe we should wait, play for time, till we can get Captain Hamilton alone and talk to him. But on the other hand, we may not be allowed time—"

"Yeh. Anything could happen, couldn't it? If somebody...something... learned what we know—Or maybe the Rorvan won't give us a chance, maybe they'll decide not to risk our figuring things out on the way home and will blow up the works while Hamilton is still unsuspicious." Gummus-lugil looked at the radio set where it stood in a corner, "I doubt if we could call from here. There's enough metal in these caves to shield us off, probably. We'll have to go outside."

"All right." Lorenzen went over and picked up his rifle. "Now is as good a time as any, I guess." There were robomonitors at the camp set to ring an alarm and start recording when a call came from the portable set.

The astronomer peered out into the street again. Nothing moved—silence, graveyard stillness. Under the violent thudding of his heart, he wondered if they could go out and make their call and come back undetected.

But if not—that had to be risked. That, and a bullet in the belly, however frightened he was. His own sweat stank in his nostrils, it was hard to keep from shaking, but some jobs had to be done. It was more than the possession of Troas. The Solar System, all humankind, had to know who its secret masters were, or there could be no peace for John Lorenzen in all his remaining days.

Gummus-lugil thrust his arms through the shoulder straps of the transceiver and stood up, grunting. He had a rifle in one hand, and a knife struck in his belt. The preliminaries were over, now they were playing for keeps.

They stepped out into the street. Their eyes wandered to the curtained entrance of the adjoining apartment—Avery was in there. It would have been good to have Thornton and von Osten along, but they couldn't risk waking the man or creature or thing who called himself Edward Avery.

Down the long row of doorways, their hushed footfalls seeming thunder-loud; out of the central cave, slowly upward through the silent empty tunnel to the open sky—

A Rorvan stepped out of a side tunnel. He had a musket, and it swung to cover them. The yellow eyes blazed with sudden alarm, and he rapped out the question: "Where are you going?"

Lorenzen checked himself just before answering; he wasn't supposed to know the language. He smiled, spreading his hands, and walked closer. The Rorvan's gun wavered. If they were unsuspecting guests—Then decision came, and he waved them back.

"Of course," whispered Gummus-lugil bitterly. "And tomorrow we'll be told it was for our own good, there are dangerous animals out there—Go on up to him, John. Don't act threatening, but give him an argument."

Lorenzen nodded. He approached till the musket was almost in his stomach. "Look," he said patiently, "we just want to take a walk. Anything wrong with that? All we want to do is take a stroll, and you're a flea-bitten son of an illegitimate alley cat."

The guard snarled, "No!" and tried to thrust him back.

Then Gummus-lugil was behind Lorenzen. He reached out and grabbed the musket and twisted the barrel aside. Lorenzen's own hand followed, jerking the weapon loose and stepping aside. The Turk leaped forward, his fist going before him. There was a dull crack, and the Rorvan lurched back and fell. Gummus-lugil fumbled on top of him, getting hands on his throat.

After a moment: "All right. Cut some pieces from his shirt—tie him up, gag him. Might be simpler to kill him, but—"

In a minute they were again moving up the tunnel, fast. There had been little sound, no alarm. But at any moment, the whole cave might wake with a scream.

The end of the passage loomed before them, blue-black darkness and the pitiless brilliance of the Hercules stars. They burst out of it, and the trees were around them and the sky overhead and they heard the remote squall of a hunting animal.

"Over here—away from the cave! Now the grease is in the fire, whatever we do." Gummus-lugil squatted under the low, massive bole of a tree and slipped off his radio set. His fingers were deft in the gloom, feeling for the controls. "Got to warm it up— What'll we do when we've sent the call?"

"I don't know. Try to hide out somewhere—or maybe surrender—" Lorenzen drew a shuddering breath. He wondered if the pounding of his heart could be heard.

The dial face of the transceiver glowed, a round eye in the shadows. Gummus-lugil slipped on his earphones and tapped the sender key a few times, experimentally. "Not quite not yet—"

An alarm went off, a high screaming note which went through Lorenzen like a sword. He sprang back, jerking his rifle up and sucking in a gasp of air. "They've found that sentry—"

"Or they have a hidden detector somewhere, set to whistle when we try calling base." Gummus-lugil cursed luridly.

Slim leaping forms were boiling up in the tunnel entrance, black against its light. A Rorvan voice howled above the yell of the siren: "Stop that! Stop that radio (?) or we will kill you!"

Gummus-lugil began tapping out his message.

Lorenzen ran away from him, zig-zagging between the trees till he was several meters off. The wiry underbrush snagged at his ankles, he stumbled and cursed and crashed an elbow numbingly against a hidden branch. But the enemy's attention had to be drawn from the radio, Gummus-lugil had to live long enough to send the word. Lorenzen yelled defiantly. There was no time now to be frightened.

A dozen muskets cracked. He couldn't hear the hungry buzz of lead around his ears, but several slugs thudded into the tree behind which he stood. It was a heavy trunk forking into two main branches at one and a half meters' height; he rested his rifle in the crotch, squinting between the blur of leaves, and thumbed the weapon to automatic fire. The Rorvan sprang for him.

His gun spoke, a soft chatter, no betraying streaks of light. The indistinct mass of running shadows broke up. He heard them screaming raggedly, saw them topple, and even then felt the sorrow of it. *Djugaz, Alasvu, Silish, Menuha, Sinarru, you were good comrades. You were my friends once.*

The Rorvan drew back, out of the grove and away from the silhouetting cave entrance. They'd circle around and close in; but dit-dit-dah-dit, dah dit-dah, every second they lost betrayed them.

Something like a tommy gun began to stutter, throwing a sleet of white-hot tracers into the darkness under the trees. So now they were pulling out their real armory! Lorenzen shot back, blindly, and waited for death.

More of them came from underground. Lorenzen fired, forcing them back; but some must be getting past his curtain of lead. The gunstock was cool and hard against his cheek. He was dimly aware of dew wet and heavy underfoot. A glow in the sky said that Sister was rising above the eastern mountains.

Something blazed in the cave mouth. Lorenzen saw a knot of Rorvan explode, falling and fleeing. Two figures loomed huge against the light—Thornton and von Osten; they'd heard the racket and come out to fight!

The German fired in the direction of the tracer stream. Suddenly it went out. Von Osten roared and moved away from the tunnel entrance. He wasn't quite fast enough. Lorenzen heard another metallic rattle. Von Osten spun on his heels, lifted his arms, and tumbled like a rag doll. Thornton flopped to the ground and wormed for the shadows.

The night was full of eyes and flying metal. The Rorvan had surrounded the grove and were shooting wildly into it, even as they crawled and zigzagged their own way under its trees.

"John! Where are you?" The urgent whisper ran like a snake under the low gnarled branches.

"Over here, Kemal."

The Turk belly-crawled to Lorenzen's tree and stood up with his rifle poised. The first pale streaks of moonlight fell between the leaves and dappled his face. There was no sound of victory in his tones, no time for that, but he muttered quickly: "I got a message off. Not time for much of one, just that we were in trouble with the natives and they weren't really natives at all. Now what?"

"Now," said Lorenzen, "I guess we just stand them off as long as we can."

"Yeh. It'll take the boys at base a while to play back my message, and triangulate our exact position, and send some armed boats here. We won't last that long."

Gunfire crackled to their right. A heavy form rose and burst into the grove, running fast. "Over here!" cried Lorenzen. "Over here, Joab!" He and Gummus-lugil fell to their stomachs as lead snapped after his voice.

The Martian, almost invisible in his black pajamas, eeled up to them. He was breathing hard, and a stray moon beam turned his face chalky. "Heard the noise…got up, saw you gone. Avery said stay there, but—Rorvan tried to stop us, we fought through them. Just a guess you were being attacked, but a right one. What's going on?"

Lorenzen didn't answer. He was leading a crawl away from their position, toward a spot of deeper shadow. Here several trees grew almost in a circle, forming a high barricade. They slipped between the trunks and stood up, leveling their rifles in three directions through the boughs.

Then the Rorvan charged, and for a moment it was all blaze and thunder, yelling and shooting, golden-eyed shadows rushing out of shadow and falling again. A couple of grenades were lobbed but exploded on the outside of the natural stockade. The Solarian rifles hammered, hosing explosive shells. Rorvan bullets wailed and thudded, other tommy guns were waking up, a storm of killing.

The charge broke and drew back, snarling in the moon-spattered darkness. A few wounded aliens crawled out of sight, a few dead lay emptily where they had fallen. There was a sharp reek of smoke in the chill windless air.

Stillness, for what seemed like many minutes. Then a human voice called out of the dark: "Will you parley?"

Avery's voice.

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"All right," said Gummus-lugil. "Come alone."

The moon rose higher, and a long slant of light caught the psychman as he stepped from behind a tree. There was no sight of the Rorvan, no sound from them where they lay ringing in the place of siege. After the racket of battle, it was as if an immense hush had fallen over the world.

Avery walked up to the ring of trees and looked into the mouth of a rifle. "May I come inside?" he asked gently.

"Yes, I guess so," said Gummus-lugil.

The psychman forced his body between two boles. Lorenzen's eyes were getting used to the darkness now, he could see Avery's face vaguely, and there was no mistaking the horror that wobbled in his voice. "What do you want?" asked the astronomer harshly.

"To find out if you've gone crazy, all of you...why you turned on your hosts, friendly natives—"

Gummus-lugil laughed sardonically. Thornton shrugged and murmured: "They didn't seem very friendly when they killed Friedrich von Osten."

Lorenzen made the full answer: "They aren't natives, and you know that as well as I do. You ought to! Or are you really one of them in disguise?"

"What do you mean?" cried Avery. "Are you all gone crazy?"

“Stow it,” said Lorenzen wearily. In a few cold words, he explained his conclusions. “And what has happened since certainly bears me out,” he finished. “They detected our radio. They produced submachine guns as good as any at Sol. And they tried to kill us before we could call base.”

Thornton whistled, and then clamped his lips thinly together. Avery nodded, with a great weariness. “All right,” he said tonelessly. “What did you tell the camp?”

“What I’ve told you.”

“There wouldn’t have been time. Not in Morse code.”

Lorenzen felt admiration for the brain behind that, pudgy face. “You win,” he said. “But we did get across that we were in trouble and that the Rorvan are not natives. With that much of a clue, Hamilton can put two and two together as well as I.”

“You might tell the Rorvan that,” said Thornton. “If they kill us, the boats from camp should be prepared to—punish them.”

Suddenly Avery was raging. He shook his fist, standing there in the middle of them, and spat at the shadowy ground. “You fools! You utter blind blundering idiots! Don’t you realize—the Rorvan run the galaxy! You’ve set yourselves up against the Galactic Empire!”

“I wondered about that—” whispered Gummus-lugil.

“Call the camp again. Tell them to stay away from here. They wouldn’t have a chance. The Rorvan science is ten thousand years ahead of ours.” Avery’s voice dropped, becoming calmer, but he spoke fast. “It may not be too late to repair the damage. If you’ll help me flange up a story that will satisfy Hamilton, things can still be patched up. But Sol must never know her true status. I’ll explain why later, to you three only. But move, now! Stop those boats!”

Almost, he had them. The whip-crack in his voice brought Gummuslugil's rifle down and the Turk half turned, as if to go back to his radio. Thornton's long jaw sagged.

Then Lorenzen laughed. "A nice try, Ed," he said. "But it won't go over, you know."

"What are you talking about? I tell you, if those boats come here they'll be disintegrated, the Rorvan will have to wipe out the whole camp and the ship—"

Lorenzen's mind felt unnaturally cold and clear, it was like the high chill heaven above him. His words came hard and fast: "If the Rorvan are that good, why didn't they just annihilate us with a disintegrator beam? Or jam our radio? Why did they go through all this clumsy deception in the first place? No, Ed, you're bluffing again." With an angry snap: "And now you can tell us the truth or get out of here!"

Something broke in Avery. It was indecent, watching the sudden sag in him, how he slumped over and dropped his eyes. Lorenzen was obscurely glad the light was so dim.

"The boats ought to be loading," said Thornton. "It won't take them many minutes to fly here!"

Sister was well above the mountains now, her strange face turned to a blue-green crescent ringed in by a thousand frosty stars. A low little wind sighed through the grove and rustled the leaves. Out in the shadows, two Rorvan spoke together, a dull mutter of unhuman voices; and far off, the sea pulsed on a wide beach.

"All right," whispered Avery.

"It's some plan of your clique in the government at home, isn't it?" Lorenzen thrust relentlessly against the man's buckling resistance. "You were the boys responsible for the *Da Gama* and for all our troubles, weren't you? Tell me, did you hire the Rorvan for this job?"

"No. No, they just happened to be here when the *Hudson* came." Avery spoke so soft that it was hard to make him out. "Their home lies, oh, I guess ten thousand lightyears from Sol; it's an Earthlike planet, and their civilization is at about the same stage as ours, technologically. They were also hunting worlds to colonize. This expedition found Troas and was investigating it when we showed up. They saw our ship transiting the moon as we went into orbit—

"They got alarmed, of course. They couldn't know who we were, or what we intended, or…anything. They moved their own big ship into an orbit normal to ours and farther out; naturally, not looking for any such thing, none of us have spotted it. They camouflaged their spaceboats and their camp, that job was done before we'd gotten around to photographing this particular area. For a while they watched us from space as we set up our camp and began working. It wasn't hard to guess that our intentions were the same as theirs, but, of course, they wanted to be sure, they wanted to know all about us while betraying as little as possible about themselves. So they decided to pose as natives. The party which guided us here was set down a few kilometers from our camp, after its artifacts had been manufactured in their machine shop. It went in on foot—"

"Nice idea," murmured Thornton. "The strategy is even brilliant. Naturally, we would show and tell much more to primitive natives than to alien spacemen who might be potential enemies or competitors."

"Meanwhile," resumed Avery, almost as if he hadn't heard, "the rest of them were making this fake village. A heroic labor, even with their machinery and atomic power to help. They figured the presence of civilized natives—if we could be fooled into believing that—might scare us off for good. You guessed rightly, John. So did I, as I studied their language back in camp. Little discrepancies kept popping up, things for which a psychman gets a kind of feel. I finally confronted Djugaz with the evidence and told him I wanted to help. Since then I've been working with the Rorvan."

"Why?" Gummus-lugil shouted.

"I wanted to spare the *Hudson* the fate of the *Da Gama.*"

Silence again. Then: "Murdered, you mean?" growled Thornton.

"No. No, let me explain." The flat, beaten voice ran on, under the shadows and the distorted moon. "You know the doctrine for a returning interstellar ship, one that's landed men on a new planet. It calls the Patrol base on Ceres, Triton, Ganymede, or Iapetus, whichever is closest, makes a preliminary report, and gets clearance for Earth. We knew the *Da Gama* would report to Ceres, and we suspected it would report Troas colonizable. So we took care to have Ceres Base staffed with men loyal to us. When the ship returned and called, it was boarded and taken over. But no one was hurt. You remember New Eden? The very beautiful planet of Tau Ceti which has civilized natives? We've made an arrangement with them. The men of the *Da Gama* are there. It isn't prison, they're free to live as they wish. But we don't want them back at Sol!"

"A lot of them had families," said Gummus-lugil.

"Somebody has to suffer a little in great causes. The families have been pensioned. But I still wanted to spare all of you even that much. I wanted to...well, I have my own wife and kids. I was chosen by lot to be psychman for this expedition, and was ready never to see my people again. Then this looked like a chance…we could have come home in the normal way, reported failure, Troas would have been forgotten—"

"All right," said Lorenzen. "So the psychocrats want to keep man from colonizing. Before long, the economic failure of interstellar travel is going to keep him from the stars completely. Now tell us why."

Avery looked up. His face was tortured, but a dim hope stirred in his tones. "It's for the best," he said eagerly. "I want you to work with me, fool Hamilton and the others when they arrive—we can talk about an unfortunate misunderstanding, a riot, some such thing—I tell you, the whole future of our race depends on it!"

"How?"

Avery looked higher, up to the cold glitter of the stars. "Man isn't ready for such a step," he said quietly. "Our race's knowledge has outstripped its wisdom before now, and we got the two-century hell from which we've just emerged. The psychodynamic men in government were opposed to the whole idea of interstellar travel. It's too late to stop that now, but we hope to choke it off by discouragement. In a thousand years, man may be ready for it. He isn't yet. He's not grown up enough."

"That's your theory!" snapped Gummus-lugil. "Your brainsick theory!"

"It is history, and the equations which interpret and explain and predict history. Science has finally gotten to a stage where man can control his own future, his own society; war, poverty, unrest, all the things which have merely happened, uncontrollably, like natural catastrophes, can be stopped. But first man, the entire race of man, has to mature; *every* individual must be sane, trained in critical thinking, in self-restraint. You can't change society overnight. It will take a thousand years of slow, subtle, secret direction—propaganda here, education there, the hidden interplay of economics and religion and technology—to evolve the culture we want. It won't look like anything which has gone before. Men won't be blind, greedy, pushing, ruthless animals; there will be restraint, and dignity, and contentment—there will be thought, everyone will think as naturally as he now breathes. *Then* we can go into the galaxy!"

"Long time to wait," muttered Gummus-lugil.

"It is necessary, I tell you! Or do you want your race to stay forever animal? We've expanded far enough physically; it's past time for us to start evolving mentally—spiritually, if you like. We…psychocrats…have a pretty good idea of the path to be followed, the slow directed evolution of society. We have the data, and we've set up a lot of the initial conditions out of which Utopia will evolve. Little things—but a university has been founded in England, and in another two centuries Europe will again be a full member of civilization; the balance of economic power is gradually shifting into Asia, India will become a leading part of the Union, the contemplative Hindu philosophy will tend to leaven the aggressiveness of Western man. We have it planned, I tell you. Not in detail, but we know where we're going—"

"I think I see," murmured Lorenzen. The wind wove around his voice, and a moonbeam flitted across his eyes. "Interstellar travel would upset this."

"Yes, yes!" Avery was speaking easily now, his tones played on them, vibrating through the grove like prophecy. "Suppose men learn that Troas is habitable. The Rorvan can't compete, they haven't our talent for military organization—that's why they were bluffing, and if the bluff fails they'll bow out and go look for another planet. It'll change the whole attitude of man. Suddenly the psychic atmosphere will become another one.

"If desultory search turned up one usable planet in twenty years, then a fleet of hunters would almost guarantee one every four or five years—more territory than we will ever need. Men will realize they *can* emigrate after all. The orientation of society will change, outward instead of inward; there will be no halting that process.

"Our psychodynamic data won't be valid any longer, we'll be as much in the dark as anyone else. The rush of emigration will produce a turmoil which we couldn't possibly control, our created conditions will vanish and we won't be able to set up new ones. The colonists will tend to be elements which were malcontent at home, and many of them will be rather unfriendly to Sol's government for a long time to come—more trouble, more unpredictability, no way to direct it at all! Before long, the scale of human society will become so big as to be forever beyond control. The idea of a unified galaxy is nonsense, if you stop to think about it; there isn't that much trade or intercourse of any sort. A million eccentric little civilizations will spring up and go their own ways—

"Interstellar exploration will be given a tremendous boost. Absolutely unpredictable new factors will be forever entering, to prohibit stability… alien planets, alien civilizations, new knowledge about the physical universe, mutations—

"And man will again be the victim of chance. There will be chaos, and suffering, the rise and fall of whole cultures, war and oppression, from now till the end of time!"

He stopped for a little while, his words rolling away into silence. The four of them stood unmoving, huddled together inside a ring of alien guns. It was as if they waited.

"All right," said Avery at last. "You have my answer. Now I ask for yours. Will you help me explain all this away; will you go back home and keep your mouths shut for the rest of your lives? It's asking a lot of you, I know —but can you face the future you have betrayed if you don't?"

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They stared at each other. "You'll have to decide quickly," said the psychman. There was a sudden calm over him, he met their gaze and smiled a little in the wan half-light. "The boats will be here any minute now."

Gummus-lugil scuffed the ground with his boots. Misery twisted his face. Thornton sighed. It was Lorenzen who felt decision hard and sharp within himself, and who spoke.

"Ed," he asked, "do you *know* all this is true?"

"I've worked with it all my life, John."

"That isn't an answer. In fact, you've used more than your share of semantically loaded words tonight. I asked how certain your conclusions were—about what will happen if man stays in the Solar System, and what if he doesn't."

"The first is a virtual certainty. We *know* how history can be made to go. Of course, you could always say what if a dark star crashes into our sun—but be reasonable!"

"Yet you say with one mouth that if man goes to the stars, his future is unpredictable and his future will be black."

Gummus-lugil and Thornton jerked their heads up to stare at Lorenzen.

"Unpredictable in detail," said Avery, with a ragged edge in his tone. "In general outlines, I can foresee—"

"Can you, now? I doubt it. In fact, I deny it altogether. Reality, the physical universe and all its possibilities, it's just too big to be included in any human theory. And if things go wrong somewhere in the galaxy—there may well be other places where they go right, more right than you or anyone else could predict."

"I didn't say we should stay out of space forever, John. Only till we've learned restraint, and kindliness, and the difficult process of thinking—"

"Till we've all become molded into the same pattern—*your* pattern!" said Lorenzen harshly. "I claim that man crawling into his own little shell to think pure thoughts is no longer man. I claim that with all our failures and all our sins, we've still done damn well for an animal that was running around in the jungle only two hundred lifetimes ago. I like man as he is, not man as a bunch of theorists think he ought to be. And one reason we've come as far as we have, is that nobody has ever forced the whole race into a copy of himself—we've always had variety, always had the rebel and the heretic. We need them!"

"Now you're getting emotional, John," said Avery.

"A neat, loaded answer, Ed, which dodges the fact that this is an emotional issue. A matter of preference and belief. Personally, I believe that no small group has the right to impose its own will on everybody else. And that's what you were doing, you psychocrats."

Lorenzen turned to the others. "I vote for telling the truth, going out to the stars, and taking the consequences," he said. "Good, bad, or most likely indifferent, I want to see what the consequences are, and I think most men do."

Avery's eyes pleaded with the remaining two.

"I...I am with you, John," said Thornton. "Men ought to be free."

"I want that little farm," said Gummus-lugil. "And if my great great-greatgrandson can't go find his own, then the race will've gone to hell and it's just too bad for him."

Avery turned from them, and they saw his tears.

"I'm sorry, Ed," whispered Lorenzen.

Now it was only to tell Hamilton and the rest of the crew. The *Hudson* would go home; she would not call the Patrol, but head for Earth and tell her story directly to its radios. Then it would be too late for suppression. The government would fall, there would be a new election, the psychocrats would be booted out of office—Lorenzen hoped some of them could return later, they were good men in their way and would be needed in the days to come. But it didn't matter much, one way or another, not when men were looking up again to the stars.

"I should ask the Rorvan to kill you," said Avery. His voice came thin and shaking as he wept. "I won't, but I should. You've sabotaged the real future of man, maybe the future of the entire universe. I hope you're pleased with yourselves!"

He stumbled from them, back into the forests. Lorenzen saw flitting shadows out in the night, the Rorvan were retreating—back to their own spaceboats, he guessed. Maybe they'd take Avery with them, to hide till the anger of men had faded.

From afar he heard the nearing thunder of Hamilton's rockets.

Two men and one alien, as much a thinking, feeling creature as they, had died, and a government and a dream would follow them, so that all men might own the sky. Had Avery been right after all?

Lorenzen knew bleakly that his last question would not be answered for a thousand years. There might never be an answer.

TIGER BY THE TAIL

Captain Flandry opened his eyes and saw a metal ceiling. Simultaneously, he grew aware of the thrum and quiver which meant he was aboard a spaceship running on ultradive.

He sat up with a violence that sent the dregs of alcohol swirling through his head. He'd gone to sleep in a room somewhere in the stews of Catawrayannis, with no prospect or intention of leaving the city for an indefinite time—let alone the planet! Now—

The chilling realization came that he was not aboard a human ship. Humanoid, yes, from the size and design of things, but no vessel ever built within the borders of the Empire, and no foreign make that he knew of.

Even from looking at this one small cabin, he could tell. There were bunks, into one of which he had fitted pretty well, but the sheets and blankets were of plastic weave. They seemed—he looked more closely—the sheets seemed to be of some vegetable fiber, the blankets of long bluish-grey hair. There were a couple of chairs and a table in the middle of the room, wooden, and they must have seen better days for they were elaborately handcarved in an intricate interwoven design new to Flandry—and planetary art-forms were a hobby of his. The way and manner in which the metal plating had been laid was another indication, and—

He sat down again, buried his whirling head in his hands, and tried to think. There was a thumping in his head and a vile taste in his mouth which liquor didn't ordinarily leave—at least not the stuff he'd been drinking—and now that he remembered, he'd gotten sleepy much earlier than one would have expected when the girl was so good-looking—

Drugged—oh, no! Tell me I'm not as stupid as a stereo film hero! Anything but that!

But who'd have thought it, who'd have looked for it? Certainly the people and beings on whom he's been trying to get a lead would never try such a stunt. Besides, none of them had been around, he was sure of it. He'd simply been out building part of the elaborate structure of demimonde acquaintances and information which would eventually, by exceeding indirect routes, lead him to those he was seeking, He simply been out having a good time—*quite* a good time, in fact—and—

And now someone from outside the Empire had him. And now what?

He got up a little unsteadily, and looked around for his clothes. No sign of them. And he paid three hundred credits for that outfit, too. He stamped savagely over to the door. It didn't have a photocell attachment; he jerked it open and found himself looking down the muzzle of a blaster.

It was of different design from any he knew, but it was quite unmistakable. Captain Flandry sighed, relaxed his taut muscles, and looked more closely at the guard who held it.

He was humanoid to a high degree, perhaps somewhat stockier than terrestrial average—and come to think of it, the artificial gravity was a little higher than one gee—and with very white skin, long tawny hair and beard, and oblique violet eyes. His ears were pointed and two small horns grew above his heavy eyebrow ridges, but otherwise he was manlike enough. With civilized clothes and a hooded cloak he could easily pass himself off for human.

Not in the getup he wore, of course, which consisted of a kilt and tunic, shining beryllium-copper cuirass and helmet, buskins over bare legs, and a murderous-looking dirk. As well as a couple of scalps hanging at his belt.

He gestured the prisoner back, and blew a long hollow blast on a horn slung at his side. The wild echoes chased each other down the long corridor, hooting and howling with a primitive clamor that tingled faintly along Captain Flandry's spine.

He thought slowly, while he waited: No intercom, apparently not even speaking tubes laid the whole length of the ship. And household articles of wood and animal and vegetable fibers, and that archaic costume there—They were barbarians, all right. But no tribe that he knew about.

That wasn't too surprising, since the Terrrestrial Empire and the half-dozen other civilized states in the known galaxy ruled over several thousands of intelligent races and had contact with nobody knew how many more thousands more. Many of the others were, of course, still planet-bound, but quite a few tribes along the Imperial border had mastered a lot of human technology without changing their fundamental outlook on things. Which is what comes of hiring barbarian mercenaries.

The peripheral tribes were still raiders, menaces to the border planets and merely nuisances to the Empire as a whole. Periodically they were bought off, or played off against each other—or the Empire might even send a punitive expedition out. But if one day a strong barbarian race under a strong leader should form a reliable coalition—then *vae victis!*

A party of Flandry's captors, apparently officers, guardsmen, and a few slaves, came down the corridor. Their leader was tall and powerfully built, with a cold arrogance in his pale-blue eyes that did not hide a calculating intelligence. There was a golden coronet on his head, and the robes that swirled around his big body were rainbow-gorgeous. Flandry recognized some items as having been manufactured within the Empire. Looted, probably.

They came to a halt before him and the leader looked him up and down with a deliberately insulting gaze. To be thus surveyed in the nude could have been badly disconcerting, but Flandry was immune to embarrassment and his answering stare was bland.

The leader spoke at last, in strongly accented but fluent Anglic: “You may as well accept the fact that you are a prisoner, Captain Flandry.”

They’d have gone through his pockets, of course. He asked levelly, “Just to satisfy my own curiosity, was that girl in your pay?”

“Of course. I assure you that the Scothani are not the brainless barbarians of popular Terrestrial superstition, though—” a bleak smile—“it is useful to be thought so.”

“The Scothani? I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure—”

“You have probably not heard of us, though we have had some contact with the Empire. We have found it convenient to remain in obscurity, as far as Terra is concerned, until the time ripe. But—what do you think caused the Alarri to invade you, fifteen years ago?”

Flandry thought back. He had been a boy then, but he had, of course, avidly followed the news accounts of the terrible fleets that swept in over the marches and attacked Vega itself. Only the hardest fighting at the Battle of Mirzan had broken the Alarri. Yet it turned out that they’d been fleeing still another tribe, a wild and mighty race who had invaded their own system with fire and ruin. It was a common enough occurrence in the turbulent barbarian stars; this one incident had come to the Empire’s notice only because the refugees had tried conquer it in turn. A political upheaval within the Terrestrial domain had prevented closer investigation before the matter had been all but forgotten.

"So you were driving the Alarri before you?" asked Flandry with as close an approximation to the right note of polite interest as he could manage in his present condition.

"Aye. And others. The Scothani have quite a little empire now, out there in the wilderness of the Galaxy. But, since were never originally contacted by Terrestrials, we have, as I say, remained little known to them."

So—the Scothani had learned their technology from some other race, possibly other barbarians. It was a familiar pattern, Flandry could trace it out in his mind. Spaceships landed on the primitive world, the initial awe of the natives gave way to the realization that the skymen weren't so very different after all—they could be killed like anyone else; traders, students, laborers, mercenary warriors visited the more advanced worlds, brought back knowledge of their science and technology; factories were built, machines produced, and some local king used the new power to impose his rule on all his planet; and then, to unite his restless subjects, he had to turn their faces outward, promise plunder and glory if they followed him out to the stars—

Only the Scothani had carried it farther than most. And lying as far from the Imperial border as they did, they could build up a terrible power without the complacent, politics-ridden Empire being more than dimly aware of the fact—until the day when—

Vae victis!

*****

“Let us have a clear understanding,” said the barbarian chief. “You are a prisoner on a warship already lightyears from Llynathawr, well into the Imperial marches and bound for Scotha itself. You have no chance of rescue, and mercy depends entirely on your own conduct. Adjust it accordingly.”

“May I ask why you picked me up?” Flandry’s tone was mild.

“You are of noble blood, and a high ranking officer in the Imperial intelligence service. You may be worth something as a hostage. But primarily we want information.”

“But I—”

“I know.” The reply was disgusted. “You’re very typical of your miserable kind. I’ve studied the Empire and its decadence long enough to know that. You’re just another worthless younger son, given a high-paying sinecure so you can wear a fancy uniform and play soldier. You don’t amount to anything.”

Flandry let an angry flush go up his cheek. “Look here—”

“It’s perfectly obvious,” said the barbarian. “You come to Llynathawr to track down certain dangerous conspirators. So you register yourself in the biggest hotel in Catawrayannis as Captain Dominic Flandry of the Imperial Intelligence Service, you strut around in your expensive uniform dropping dark hints about your leads and your activities—and these consist of drinking and gambling and wenching the whole night and sleeping the whole day!” A cold humor gleamed in the blue eyes. “Unless it is your intention that the Empire’s enemies shall laugh themselves to death at the spectacle.”

“If that’s so,” began Flandry thinly, “then why—”

"You will know something. You can't help picking up a lot of miscellaneous information in your circles, no matter how hard you try not to. Certainly you know specific things about the organization and activities of your own corps which we would find useful information. We'll squeeze all you know out of you! Then there will be other services you can perform, people within the Empire you can contact, documents you can translate for us, perhaps various liaisons you can make—eventually, you may even earn your freedom." The barbarian lifted one big fist. "And in case you wish to hold anything back, remember that the torturers of Scotha know their trade."

"You needn't make melodramatic threats," said Flandry sullenly.

The fist shot out, and Flandry fell to the floor with darkness whirling and roaring through his head. He crawled to hands and knees, blood dripping from his face, and vaguely he heard the voice: "From here on, little man, you are to address me as befits a slave speaking to a crown prince of Scotha."

The Terrestrial staggered to his feet. For a moment his fists clenched. The prince smiled grimly and knocked him down again. Looking up, Flandry saw brawny hands resting on blaster butts. Not a chance, not a chance.

Besides, the prince was hardly a sadist. Such brutality was the normal order among the barbarians—and come to think of it, slaves within the Empire could be treated similarly.

And there was the problem of staying alive.

"Yes, sir," he mumbled.

The prince turned on his heel and walked away.

They gave him back his clothes, though someone had stripped the gold braid and the medals away.

Flandry looked at the soiled, ripped garments and sighed. Tailor-made—!

He surveyed himself in the mirror as he washed and shaved. The face that looked back was wide across the cheekbones, straight-nosed and square-jawed, with carefully waved reddish-brown hair and a mustache trimmed with equal attention. Probably too handsome, he reflected, wiping the blood from under his nose, but he'd been young when he had the plasti-cosmetician work on him. Maybe when he got out of this mess he should have the face made over to a slightly more rugged pattern to fit his years. He was in his thirties now, after all—getting to be a big boy, Dominic.

The fundamental bone structure of head and face was his own, however, and so were the eyes: large and bright, with a hint of obliquity, the iris of that curious gray which can seem any color, blue or green or black or gold. And the trim, medium-tall body was genuine too. He hated exercises, but went through a dutiful daily ritual since he needed sinews and coordination for his work. And, too, a man in condition was something to look at among the usually flabby nobles of Terra; he'd found his figure no end of help in making his home leaves pleasant.

Well, can't stand here admiring yourself all day, old fellow. He slipped blouse, pants, and jacket over his silkite undergarments, pulled on the sheening boots, tilted his officer's cap at an angle of well gauged rakishness, and walked out to meet his new owners.

The Scothani weren't such bad fellows, he soon learned. They were big brawling lusty barbarians, out for adventure and loot and fame as warriors; they had courage and loyalty and a wild streak of sentiment that he liked. But they could also fly into deadly rages, they were casually cruel to anyone that stood in their way, and Flandry acquired a not too high respect for their brains. It would have helped if they'd washed oftener, too.

This warship was one of a dozen which Cerdic, the crown prince, had taken out on a plundering cruise. They'd sacked a good many towns, even some on nominally Imperial planets, and on the way back had sent down a man in a lifeboat to contact Cerdic's agents on Llynathawr, which was notoriously the listening post of this sector of the Empire. Learning that there was something going on which a special agent from Terra had been investigating, Cerdic had ordered him picked up. And that was that.

Now they were homeward bound, their holds stuffed with loot and their heads stuffed with plans for further inroads. It might not have meant much, but—well—Cerdic and his father Penda didn't seem to be just ordinary barbarian chiefs, nor Scothania an ordinary barbarian nation.

Could it be that somewhere out there among the many stars someone had finally organized a might that could break the Empire? Could the Long Night really be at hand?

Flandry shoved the thought aside. He had too much to do right now. Even his own job at Llynathawr, important as it was, could and would be handled by someone else—though not, he thought a little sadly, with the Flandry touch—and his own immediate worry was here and now. He had to find out the extent of power and ambition of the Scothani; he had to learn their plans and get the information to Terra, and somehow spike them even a little. After that there might be time to save his own hide.

Cerdic had him brought to the captain's cabin. The place was a typical barbarian chiefs den, with the heads of wild beasts on the walls and their hides on the floors, old shields and swords hung up in places of honor, a magnificent golden vase stolen from some planet of artists shining in a corner. But there were incongruous modern touches, a microprint reader and many bookrolls from the Empire, astrographic tables and computer, a vodograph. The prince sat in a massive carven chair, a silkite robe flung carelessly over his broad shoulders. He nodded with a certain affability.

"Your first task will be to learn Scothanian," he said without preliminary. "As yet almost none of our people, even nobles, speak Anglic, and there are many who will want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir," said Flandry. It was what he would most have desired.

"You had better also start organizing all you know so you can present it coherently," said the prince. "And I, who have lived in the Empire, will be able to check enough of your statements to tell whether you are likely speaking the truth." He smiled mirthlessly. "If there is reason to suspect you are lying, you will be put to the torture. And one of our Sensitives will then get at the truth."

So they had Sensitives, too. Telepaths who could tell whether a being was lying when pain had sufficiently disorganized his mind were as bad as the Empire's hypnoprobes.

"I'll tell the truth, sir," he said.

"I suppose so. If you cooperate, you'll find us not an ungrateful people. There will be more wealth than was ever dreamed of when we go into the Empire. There will also be considerable power for such humans as are our liaison with their race."

"Sir," began Flandry, in a tone of weak self-righteousness, "I couldn't think of—"

"Oh, yes, you could," said Cerdic glumly. "I know you humans. I traveled incognito throughout your whole Empire, I was on Terra itself. I posed as one of you, or when convenient as just another of the subject races. I *know* the Empire—its utter decadence, its self-seeking politicians and pleasure-loving mobs, corruption and intrigue everywhere you go, collapse of morals and duty-sense, decline of art into craft and science into stagnancy—you were a great race once, you humans, you were among the first to aspire to the stars and we owe you something for that, I suppose. But you're not the race you once were."

The viewpoint was biased, but enough truth lay in it to make Flandry wince. Cerdic went on, his voice rising: "There is a new power growing out beyond your borders, young peoples with the strength and courage and hope-fulness of youth, and they'll sweep the rotten fragments of the Empire before them and build something new and better."

Only, thought Flandry, *first comes the Long Night, darkness and death and the end of civilization, the howling peoples in the ruins of our temples and a myriad petty tyrants holding their dreary courts in the shards of the Empire. To say nothing of the decline of good music and good cuisine, taste in clothes and taste in women and conversation as a fine art.*

"We've one thing you've lost," said Cerdic, "and I think ultimately that will be the deciding factor. Honesty. Flandry, the Scothani are a race of honest warriors."

"No doubt, sir," said Flandry.

"Oh, we have our evil characters, but they are few and the custom of private challenges soon eliminates them," said Cerdic. "And even their evil is an open and clean thing, greed or lawlessness or something like that; it isn't the bribery and conspiracy and betrayal of your rotten politicians. And most of us live by our code. It wouldn't occur to a true Scothani to do a dishonorable thing, to break an oath or desert a comrade or lie on his word of honor. Our women aren't running loose making eyes at every man they come across; they're kept properly at home till time for marriage and then they know their place as mothers and houseguiders. Our boys are raised to respect the gods and the king, to fight, and to speak truth. Death is a little thing, Flandry, it comes to everyone in his time and he cannot stay it, but honor lives forever.

"We don't corrupt ourselves. We keep honor at home and root out disgrace with death and torture. We live our code. And that is really why we will win."

Battleships help, thought Flandry. And then, looking into the cold bright eyes: *He's fanatic. But a hell of a smart one. And that kind makes the most dangerous enemy.*

Aloud he asked, humbly: "Isn't any stratagem a lie, sir? Your own disguised travels within the Empire—"

"Naturally, certain maneuvers are necessary," said the prince stiffly. "Nor does it matter what one does with regard to alien races. Especially when they have as little honor as Terrestrials."

The good old race-superiority complex, too. Oh, well.

"I tell you this," said Cerdic earnestly, "in the hope that you may think it over and see our cause is just and be with us. We will need many foreigners, especially humans, for liaison and intelligence and other services. You may still accomplish something in a hitherto wasted life."

"I'll think about it, sir," said Flandry.

"Then go."

Flandry got.

*****

The ship was a good three weeks en route to Scotha. It took Flandry about two of them to acquire an excellent working knowledge of the language, but he preferred to simulate difficulty and complained that he got lost when talk was too rapid. It was surprising how much odd information you picked up when you were thought not to understand what was being said. Not anything of great military significance, of course, but general background, stray bits of personal history, attitudes and beliefs—it all went into the neat filing system which was Flandry's memory, to be correlated with whatever else he knew or learned into an astonishingly complete picture.

The Scothani themselves were quite friendly, eager to hear about the fabulous Imperial civilization and to brag of their own wonderful past and future exploits. Since there was obviously nothing he could do, Flandry was under the loosest guard and had virtually the freedom of the ship. He slept and messed with the warriors, swapped bawdy songs and dirty jokes, joined their rough-and-tumble wrestling matches to win surprised respect for his skill, and even became the close friend and confidant of some of the younger males.

The race was addicted to gambling. Flandry learned their games, taught them some of the Empire's, and before the trip's end had won back his stolen finery plus several other outfits and a pleasantly jingling purse. It was—well—he almost hated to take his winnings from these overgrown babies. It just never occurred to them that dice and cards could be made to do tricks.

The picture grew. The barbarian tribes of Scotha were firmly united under the leadership of the Frithian kings, had been for several generations. Theoretically it was an absolute monarchy, though actually all classes except the slaves were free. They had conquered at least a hundred systems outright, contenting themselves with exacting tribute and levies from most of these, and dominated all others within reach.

Under Penda's leadership, a dozen similar, smaller barbarian states had already formed a coalition with the avowed purpose of invading the Empire, capturing Terra, destroying the Imperial military forces, and making themselves masters. Few of them thought beyond the plunder to be had, though apparently some of them, like Cerdic, dreamed of maintaining and extending the Imperial domain under their own rule.

They had a formidable fleet—Flandry couldn't find out its exact size—and its organization and technology seemed far superior to that of most barbarian forces. They had a great industry, mostly slave-manned with the Scothan overlords supervising. They had shrewd leaders, who would wait till one of the Empire's recurring political crises had reduced its fighting strength, and who were extremely well informed about their enemy. It looked—bad!

Especially since they couldn't wait too long. Despite the unequalled prosperity created by industry, tribute, and piracy, all Scotha was straining at the leash, nobles and warriors in the whole coalition foaming to be at the Empire's throat; a whole Galactic sector had been seized by the same savage dream. When they came roaring in—well, you never could tell. The Empire's fighting strength was undoubtedly greater, but could it be mobilized in time? Wouldn't Penda get gleeful help from two or three rival imperia? Couldn't a gang of utterly fearless fanatics plow through the mass of self-seeking officers and indifferent mercenaries that made up most of the Imperial power today?

Might not the Long Night really be at hand?

Scotha was not unlike Terra—a little larger, a little farther from its sun, the seas made turbulent by three small close moons. Flandry had a chance to observe it telescopically—the ship didn't have magniscreens—and as they swept in, he saw the mighty disc roll grandly against the Galactic star-blaze and studied the continents with more care than he showed.

The planet was still relatively thinly populated, with great forests and plains standing empty, archaic cities and villages huddled about the steep-walled castles of the nobles. Most of its industry was on other worlds, though the huge military bases were all on Scotha and its moons. There couldn't be more than a billion Scothani all told, estimated Flandry, probably less, and many of them would live elsewhere as overlords of the interstellar domain. Which didn't make them less formidable. The witless hordes of humankind were more hindrance than help to the Empire.

Cerdic's fleet broke up, the captains bound for their estates. He took his own vessel to the capital, Iuthagaar, and brought it down in the great yards. After the usual pomp and ceremony of homecoming, he sent for Flandry.

"What is your attitude toward us now?" he asked.

"You are a very likeable people, sir," said the Terrestrial, "and it is as you say—you are a strong and honest race."

"Then you have decided to help us actively?" The voice was cold.

"I really have little choice, sir," shrugged Flandry. "I'll be a prisoner in any case, unless I get to the point of being trusted. The only way to achieve that is to give you my willing assistance."

"And what of your own nation?"

"A man must stay alive, sir. These are turbulent times."

Contempt curled Cerdic's lip. "Somehow I thought better of you," he said. "But you're a human. You could only be expected to betray your oaths for your own gain."

Surprise shook Flandry's voice. "Wasn't this what you wanted, sir?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. Now come along. But not too close—you make me feel a little sick."

They went up to the great gray castle which lifted its windy spires over the city, and presently Flandry found himself granted an audience with the King of Scothania.

It was a huge and dimlit hall, hung with the banners and shields of old wars and chill despite the fires that blazed along its length. Penda sat on one end, wrapped in furs against the cold, his big body dwarfed by the dragon-carved throne. *He had his eldest son's stern manner and bleak eyes, without the prince's bitter intensity—a strong man,* thought Flandry, *hard and ruthless and able—but perhaps not too bright.*

Cerdic had mounted to a seat on his father's right. The queen stood on his left, shivering a little in the damp draft, and down either wall reached a row of guardsmen. The fire shimmered on their breastplates and helmets and halberds; they seemed figures of legend, but Flandry noticed that each warrior carried a blaster too.

There were others in evidence, several of the younger sons of Penda, grizzled generals and councillors, nobles come for a visit. A few of the latter were of non-Scothan race and did not seem to be meeting exceptional politeness. Then there were the hangers-on, bards and dancers and the rest, and slaves scurrying about. Except for its size—and its menace—it was a typical barbarian court.

Flandry bowed the knee as required, but thereafter stood erect and met the king's eye. His position was anomalous, officially Cerdic's captured slave, actually—well, what was he? Or what could he become in time?

Penda asked a few of the more obvious questions, then said slowly: “You will confer with General Nartheof here, head of our intelligence section, and tell him what you know. You may also make suggestions if you like, but remember that false intentions will soon be discovered and punished.”

“I will be honest, your majesty.”

“Is any Terrestrial honest?” snapped Cerdic.

“I am,” said Flandry cheerfully. “As long as I’m paid, I serve faithfully. Since I’m no longer in the Empire’s pay, I must perforce look about for a new master.”

“I doubt you can be much use,” said Penda.

“I think I can, your majesty,” answered Flandry boldly. “Even in little things. For instance, this admirably decorated hall is so cold one must wear furs within it, and still the hands are numb. I could easily show a few technicians how to install a radiant heating unit that would make it like summer in here.”

Penda lifted his bushy brows. Cerdic fairly snarled: “A Terrestrial trick, that. Shall we become as soft and luxurious as the Imperials, we who hunt vorgari on ski?”

Flandry’s eyes, flitting around the room, caught dissatisfied expressions on many faces. Inside, he grinned. The prince’s austere ideals weren’t very popular with these noble savages. If they only had the nerve to—it was the queen who spoke. Her soft voice was timid: “Sire, is there any harm in being warm? I—I am always cold these days.”

Flandry gave her an appreciative look. He’d already picked up the background of Queen Gunli. She was young, Penda’s third wife, and she came from more southerly Scothan lands than Iuthagaar; her folk were somewhat more civilized than the dominant Frithians. She was certainly a knockout, with that dark rippling hair and those huge violet eyes in her pert face. And that figure too—there was a suppressed liveliness in her; he wondered if she had ever cursed the fate that gave her noble blood and thus a political marriage.

For just an instant their eyes crossed. "Be still," said Cerdic.

Gunli's hand fell lightly on Penda's. The king flushed. "Speak not to your queen thus, Cerdic," he said. "In truth this Imperial trick is but a better form of fire, which no one calls unmanly. We will let the Terrestrial make one."

Flandry bowed his most ironical bow. Cocking an eye up at the queen, he caught a twinkle. She knew.

Nartheof made a great show of blustering honesty, but there was a shrewd brain behind the hard little eyes that glittered in his hairy face. He leaned back and folded his hands behind his head and gave Flandry a quizzical stare.

"If it is as you say—" he began.

"It is," said the Terrestrial.

"Quite probably. Your statements so far check with what we already know, and we can soon verify much of the rest. If, then, you speak truth, the Imperial organization is fantastically good." He smiled. "As it should be—it conquered the stars, in the old days. But it's no better than the beings who man it, and everyone knows how venial and cowardly the Imperials are today."

Flandry said nothing, but he remembered the gallantry of the Sirian units at Garrapoli and the dogged courage of the Valatian Legion and—well, why go on? The haughty Scothani just didn't seem able to realize that a state as absolutely decadent as they imagined the Empire to be wouldn't have endured long enough to be their own enemy.

"We'll have to reorganize everything," said Nartheof. "I don't care whether what you say is true or not, it makes good sense. Our whole setup is out-moded. It's ridiculous, for instance, to give commands according to nobility and blind courage instead of proven intelligence."

"And you assume that the best enlisted man will make the best officer," said Flandry. "It doesn't necessarily follow. A strong and hardy warrior may expect more of his men than they can give. You can't all be supermen."

"Another good point. And we should eliminate swordplay as a requirement; swords are useless today.

And we have to train mathematicians to compute trajectories and everything else." Nartheof grimaced. "I hate to think what would have happened if we'd invaded three years ago, as many hotheads wanted to do. We would have inflicted great damage, but that's all."

"You should wait at least another ten or twenty years and really get prepared."

"Can't. The great nobles wouldn't stand for it. Who wants to be duke of a planet when he could be viceroy of a sector? But we have a year or two yet." Nartheof scowled. "I can get my own service whipped into shape, with your help and advice. I have most of the bright lads. But as for some of the other forces—gods, the dunderheads they have in command! I've argued myself hoarse with Nornagast, to no use. The fool just isn't able to see that a space fleet the size of ours must have a special coordinating division equipped with semantic calculators and—The worst of it is, he's a cousin to the king, he ranks me. Not much I can do."

"An accident could happen to Nornagast," murmured Flandry.

“Eh?” Nartheof gasped. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” said Flandry lightly. “But just for argument’s sake, suppose—well, suppose some good swordsman should pick a quarrel with Nornagast. I don’t doubt he has many enemies. If he should unfortunately be killed in the duel, you might be able to get to his majesty immediately after, before anyone else, and persuade him to appoint a more reasonable successor. Of course, you’d have to know in advance that there’d be a duel.”

“Of all the treacherous, underhanded—!”

“I haven’t done anything but speculate,” said Flandry mildly. “However, I might remind you of your own remarks. It’s hardly fair that a fool should have command and honor and riches instead of better men who simply happen to be of lower degree. Nor, as you yourself said, is it good for Scothania as a whole.”

“I won’t hear of any such Terrestrial vileness.”

“Of course not. I was just—well, speculating. I can’t help it. All Terrestrials have dirty minds. But we did conquer the stars once.”

“A man might go far, if only—no!” Nartheof shook himself. “A warrior doesn’t bury his hands in muck.”

“No. But he might use a pitchfork. Tools don’t mind dirt. The man who wields them doesn’t even have to know the details...But let’s get back to business.” Flandry relaxed even more lazily. “Here’s a nice little bit of information which only highly placed Imperials know. The Empire has a lot of arsenals and munitions dumps which are guarded by nothing but secrecy. The Emperor doesn’t dare trust certain units to guard such sources of power, and he can’t spare enough reliable legions to watch them all. So obscure, uninhabited planets are used.” Nartheof ’s eyes were utterly intent now. “I know of only one, but it’s a good prospect. An uninhabited, barren system not many parsecs inside the border, the second planet honeycombed with underground works that are crammed with spaceships, atomic bombs, fuel—power enough to wreck a world. A small, swift fleet could get there, take most of the stores, and destroy the rest before the nearest garrison could ever arrive in defense."

"Is that *true?"*

"You can easily find out. If I'm lying, it'll cost you that small unit, that's all—and I assure you I've no desire to be tortured to death."

"Holy gods!" Nartheof quivered. "I've got to tell Cerdic now, right away —"

"You could. Or you might simply go there yourself without telling anyone. If Cerdic knows, he'll be the one to lead the raid. If you went, you'd get the honor—and the power—"

"Cerdic would not like it."

"Too late then. He could hardly challenge you for so bold and successful a stroke."

"And he is getting too proud of himself. He could stand a little taking down." Nartheof chuckled, a deep vibration in his shaggy breast. "Aye, by Valtam's beard, I'll do it! Give me the figures now—"

Presently the general looked up from the papers and gave Flandry a puzzled stare. "If this is the case, and I believe it is," he said slowly, "it'll be a firstrate catastrophe for the Empire. Why are you with us, human?"

"Maybe I've decided I like your cause a little better," shrugged Flandry. "Maybe I simply want to make the best of my own situation. We Terrestrials are adaptable beasts. But I have enemies here, Nartheof, and I expect to make a few more. I'll need a powerful friend."

"You have one," promised the barbarian. "You're much too useful to me to be killed. And—and—damn it, human, somehow I can't help liking you."

The dice rattled down onto the table and came to a halt. Prince Torric swore good-naturedly and shoved the pile of coins toward Flandry. "I just can't win," he laughed. "You have the gods with you, human."

For a slave, I'm not doing so badly, thought Flandry. *In fact, I'm getting rich.* "Fortune favors the weak, highness," he smiled. "The strong don't need luck."

"To Theudagaar with titles," said the young warrior. He was drunk; wine flushed his open face and spread in puddles on the table before him. "We're too good friends by now, Dominic. Ever since you got my affairs in order—"

"I have a head for figures, and of course Terrestrial education helps—Torric. But you need money."

"There'll be enough for all when we hold the Empire. I'll have a whole system to rule, you know."

Flandry pretended surprise. "Only a system? After all, a son of King Penda—"

"Cerdic's doing," Torric scowled blackly. "The dirty avagar persuaded Father that only one—himself, of course—should succeed to the throne. He said no kingdom ever lasted when the sons divided power equally."

"It seems very unfair. And how does he know he's the best?"

"He's the oldest. That's what counts. And he's conceited enough to be sure of it." Torric gulped another beakerful.

"The Empire has a better arrangement. Succession is by ability alone, among many in a whole group of families."

"Well—the old ways—what can I do?"

"That's hardly warrior's talk, Torric. Admitting defeat so soon—I thought better of you!"

"But what to *do*—?"

"There are ways. Cerdic's power, like that of all chiefs, rests on his many supporters and his own household troops. He isn't well liked. It wouldn't be hard to get many of his friends to give allegiance elsewhere."

"But—treachery—would you make a brotherslayer of me?"

"Who said anything about killing? Just—dislodging, let us say. He could always have a system or two to rule, just as he meant to give you."

"But—look, I don't know anything about your sneaking Terrestrial ways. I suppose you mean to dish—disaffect his allies, promise them more than he gives...What's that word—bribery? I don't know a thing about it, Dominic. I couldn't do it."

"You wouldn't have to do it," murmured Flandry. "I could help. What's a man for, if not to help his friends?"

Earl Morgaar, who held the conquered Zanthudian planets in fief, was a noble of power and influence beyond his station. He was also notoriously greedy.

He said to Captain Flandry: "Terrestrial, your suggestions about farming out tax-gathering have more than doubled my income. But now the natives are rising in revolt against me, murdering my troops wherever they get a chance and burning their farms rather than pay the levies. What do they do about that in the Empire?"

"Surely, sir, you could crush the rebels with little effort," said Flandry.

“Oh, aye, but dead men don’t pay tribute either. Isn’t there a better way? My whole domain is falling into chaos.”

“Several ways, sir.” Flandry sketched a few of them—puppet native committees, propaganda shifting the blame onto some scapegoat, and the rest of it. He did not add that these methods work only when skillfully administered.

“It is well,” rumbled the earl at last. His hard gaze searched Flandry’s impassively smiling face. “You’ve made yourself useful to many a Scothanian leader since coming here, haven’t you? There’s that matter of Nartheof—he’s a great man now because he captured that Imperial arsenal. And there are others. But it seems much of this gain is at the expense of other Scothani, rather than of the Empire. I still wonder about Nornagast’s death.”

“History shows that the prospect of great gain always stirs up internal strife, sir,” said Flandry. “It behooves the strong warrior to seize a dominant share of power for himself and so reunite his people against their common enemy. Thus did the early Terrestrial emperors end the civil wars and become the rulers of the then accessible universe.”

“Ummm—yes. Gain—power—wealth—aye, *some good* warrior—”

“Since we are alone, sir,” said Flandry, “perhaps I may remark that Scotha itself has seen many changes of dynasty.”

“Yes—of course, I took an oath to the king. But suppose, just suppose the best interests of Scothania were served by a newer and stronger family —”

They were into details of the matter within an hour. Flandry suggested that Prince Kortan would be a valuable ally—but beware of Torric, who had ambitions of his own—

There was a great feast given at the winter solstice. The town and the palace blazed with light and shouted with music and drunken laughter. Warriors and nobles swirled their finest robes about them and boasted of the ruin they would wreak in the Empire. It was to be noted that the number of alcoholic quarrels leading to bloodshed was unusually high this year, especially among the upper classes.

There were enough dark corners, though. Flandry stood in one, a niche leading to a great open window, and looked over the glittering town lights to the huge white hills that lay silent beyond, under the hurtling moons. Above were the stars, bright with the frosty twinkle of winter; they seemed so near that one could reach a hand up and pluck them from the sky. A cold breeze wandered in from outside. Flandry wrapped his cloak more tightly about him.

A light footfall sounded on the floor. He looked about and saw Gunli the queen. Her tall young form was vague in the shadow, but a shaft of moonlight lit her face with an unearthly radiance. She might have been a lovely girl of Terra, save for the little horns and—well—

These people aren't really human. They look human, but no people of Terra were ever so—simple-minded! Then with an inward grin: *But you don't expect a talent for intrigue in women, Terrestrial or Scothan. So the females of this particular species are quite human enough for anyone's taste.*

The cynical mirth faded into an indefinable sadness. He—damn it, he liked Gunli. They had laughed together often in the last few months, and she was honest and warm-hearted and—well, no matter, no matter.

"Why are you here all alone, Dominic?" she asked. Her voice was very quiet, and her eyes seemed huge in the cold pale moonlight.

“It would hardly be prudent for me to join the party,” he answered wryly. “I’d cause too many fights. Half of them out there hate my insides.”

“And the other half can’t do without you,” she smiled. “Well I’m as glad not to be there myself. These Frithians are savages. At home—” She looked out the window and sudden tears glittered in her eyes.

“Don’t weep, Gunli,” said Flandry softly. “Not tonight. This is the night the sun turns, remember. There is always new hope in a new year.”

“I can’t forget the old years,” she said with a bitterness that shocked him.

Understanding came. He asked quietly: “There was someone else, wasn’t there?”

“Aye. A young knight. But he was of low degree, so they married me off to Penda, who is old and chill. And Jomana was killed in one of Cerdic’s raids—” She turned her head to look at him, and a pathetic attempt at a smile quivered on her lips. “It isn’t Jomana, Dominic. He was very dear to me, but even the deepest wounds heal with time. But I think of all the other young men, and their sweethearts—”

“It’s what the men want themselves.”

“But not what the women want. Not to wait and wait and wait till the ships come back, never knowing whether there will only be his shield aboard. Not to rock her baby in her arms and know that in a few years he will be a stiffened corpse on the shores of some unknown planet. Not—well—” She straightened her slim shoulders. “Little I can do about it.”

“You are a very brave and lovely woman, Gunli,” said Flandry. “Your kind has changed history ere this.” And he sang softly a verse he had made in the Scothan bardic form:

So I see you standing,
sorrowful in darkness.
But the moonlight's broken
by your eyes tear-shining—
moonlight in the maiden's
magic net of tresses.
Gods gave many gifts, but,
Gunli, yours was greatest.

Suddenly she was in his arms ...

Sviffash of Sithafar was angry. He paced up and down the secret chamber, his tail lashing about his bowed legs, his fanged jaws snapping on the accented Scothanian words that poured out.

"Like a craieex they treat me!" he hissed. "I, king of a planet and an intelligent species, must bow before the dirty barbarian Penda. Our ships have the worst positions in the fighting line and the last chance at loot. The swaggering Scothani on Sithafar treat my people as if they were conquered peasants, not warrior allies. It is not to be endured!"

Flandry remained respectfully silent. He had carefully nursed the reptile king's smoldering resentment along ever since the being had come to Iuthagaar for conference, but he wanted Sviffash to think it was all his own idea.

"By the Dark God, if I had a chance I think I'd go over to the Terran side!" exploded Sviffash. "You say they treat their subjects decently?"

"Aye, we've learned it doesn't pay to be prejudiced about race, your majesty. In fact, many nonhumans hold Terrestrial citizenship. And of course a vassal of the Empire remains free within his own domain, except in certain matters of trade and military force where we must have uniformity. And he has the immeasurable power and wealth of the Empire behind and with him."

"My own nobles would follow gladly enough," said Sviffash. "They'd sooner loot Scothanian than Terrestrial planets, if they didn't fear Penda's revenge."

"Many other of Scotha's allies feel likewise, your majesty. And still more would join an uprising just for the sake of the readily available plunder, if only they were sure the revolt would succeed. It is a matter of getting them all together and agreeing—"

"And you have contacts everywhere, Terrestrial. You're like a spinner weaving its web. Of course, if you're caught I shall certainly insist I never had anything to do with you."

"Naturally, your majesty."

"But if it works—hah!" The lidless black eyes glittered and a forked tongue flickered out between the horny lips. "Hah, the sack of Scotha!"

"No, your majesty. It is necessary that Scotha be spared. There will be enough wealth to be had on her province planets."

"Why?" The question was cold, emotionless.

"Because you see, your majesty, we will have Scothan allies who will cooperate only on that condition. Some of the power-seeking nobles…and then there is a southern nationalist movement which wishes separation from the Frithian north…and I may say that it has the secret leadership of the queen herself…"

Flandry's eyes were as chill as his voice: "It will do you no good to kill me, Duke Asdagaar. I have left all the evidence with a reliable person who, if I do not return alive, or if I am killed later, will take it directly to the king and the people.”

The Scothan’s hands clenched white about the arms of his chair. Impotent rage shivered in his voice: “You devil! You crawling worm!”

“Name-calling is rather silly coming from one of your history,” said Flandry. “A parricide, a betrayer of comrades, a breaker of oaths, a mocker of the gods—I have all the evidence, Duke Asdagaar. Some of it is on paper, some is nothing but the names of scattered witnesses and accomplices each of whom knows a little of your career. And a man without honor, on Scotha, is better dead. In fact, he soon will be.”

“But how did you learn?” Hopelessness was coming into the duke’s tone; he was beginning to tremble a little.

“I have my ways. For instance, I learned quite a bit by cultivating the acquaintance of your slaves and servants. You highborn forget that the lower classes have eyes and ears, and that they talk among themselves.”

“Well—” The words were almost strangled. “What do you want?”

“Help for certain others. You have powerful forces at your disposal—”

Spring winds blew softly through the garden and stirred the trees to rustling. There was a deep smell of green life about them; a bird was singing somewhere in the twilight, and the ancient promise of summer stirred in the blood.

Flandry tried to relax in the fragrant evening, but he was too tense. His nerves were drawn into quivering wires and he had grown thin and hollow-eyed. So too had Gunli, but it seemed only to heighten her loveliness; it had more than a hint of the utterly alien and remote now.

“Well, the spaceship is off,” said the man. His voice was weary. “Aethagir shouldn’t have any trouble getting to Ifri, and he’s a clever lad. He’ll find a way to deliver my letter to Admiral Walton.” He scowled, and a nervous tic began over his left eye. “But the timing is so desperately close. If our forces strike too soon, or too late, it can be ruinous.”

“I don’t worry about that, Dominic,” said Gunli. “You know how to arrange these things.”

“I’ve never handled an empire before, my beautiful. The next several days will be touch and go. And that’s why I want you to leave Scotha now. Take a ship and some trusty guards and go to Alagan or Gimli or some other out-of-the-way planet.” He smiled with one corner of his mouth. “It would be a bitter victory if you died in it, Gunli.”

Her voice was haunted. “I should die. I’ve betrayed my lord—I am dishonored—”

“You’ve saved your people—your own southerners, and ultimately all Scotha.”

“But the broken oaths—” She began to weep, quietly and hopelessly.

“An oath is only a means to an end. Don’t let the means override the end.”

“An oath is an oath. But Dominic—it was a choice of standing by Penda or by—you—”

He comforted her as well as he could. And he reflected grimly that he had never before felt himself so thoroughly a skunk.

The battle in space was, to the naked eye, hardly visible-brief flashes of radiation among the swarming stars, occasionally the dark form of a ship slipping by and occulting a wisp of the Milky Way. But Admiral Walton smiled with cold satisfaction at the totality of reports given him by the semantic integrator.

"We're mopping them up," he said. "Our task force has twice their strength, and they're disorganized and demoralized anyway."

"Whom are we fighting?" wondered Chang, the executive officer.

"Don't know for sure. They've split into so many factions you can never tell who it is. But from Flandry's report, I'd say it was—what was that outlandish name now?—Duke Markagrav's fleet. He holds this sector, and is a royalist. But it might be Kelry, who's also anti-Terrestrial—but at war with Markagrav and in revolt against the king."

"Suns and comets and little green asteroids!" breathed Chang. "This Scothanian hegemony seems just to have disintegrated. Chaos! Everybody at war with everybody else, and hell take the hindmost! How'd he do it?"

"I don't know." Walton grinned. "But Flandry's the Empire's ace secret service officer. He works miracles before breakfast. Why, before these barbarians snatched him he was handling the Llynathawr trouble all by himself. And you know how he was doing it? He went there with everything but a big brass band, did a perfect imitation of a political appointee using the case as an excuse to do some high-powered roistering, and worked his way up toward the conspirators through the underworld characters he met in the course of it. They never dreamed he was any kind of danger—as we found out after a whole squad of men had worked for six months to crack the case of his disappearance."

"Then the Scothanians have been holding the equivalent of a whole army, and didn't know it!"

"That's right," nodded Walton. "The biggest mistake they ever made was to kidnap Captain Flandry. They should have played safe and kept some nice harmless cobras for pets!”

Iuthagaar was burning. Mobs rioted in the streets and howled with fear and rage and the madness of catastrophe.

The remnants of Penda’s army had abandoned the town and were fleeing northward before the advancing southern rebels. They would be harried by Tonic’s guerrillas, who in turn were the fragments of a force smashed by Earl Morgaar after Penda was slain by Kortan’s assassins. Morgaar himself was dead and his rebels broken by Nartheof. The earl’s own band had been riddled by corruption and greed and had fallen apart before the royalists’ counterblow.

But Nartheof was dead too, at the hands of Nornagasf s vengeful relatives. His own seizure of supreme power and attempt at reorganization had created little but confusion, which grew worse when he was gone. Now the royalists were a beaten force somewhere out in space, savagely attacked by their erstwhile allies, driven off the revolting conquered planets, and swept away before the remorselessly advancing Terrestrial fleet.

The Scothanian empire had fallen into a hundred shards, snapping at each other and trying desperately to retrieve their own with no thought for the whole. Lost in an incomprehensibly complex network of intrigue and betrayal, the great leaders fell, or pulled out of the mess and made hasty peace with Terra. War and anarchy flamed between the stars—but limited war, a petty struggle really. The resources and organization for real war and its attendant destruction just weren’t there any more.

A few guards still held the almost deserted palace, waiting for the Terrestrials to come and end the strife. There was nothing they could do but wait.

Captain Flandry stood at a window and looked over the city. He felt no great elation. Nor was he safe yet. Cerdic was loose somewhere on the planet, and Cerdic had undoubtedly guessed who was responsible.

Gunli came to the human. She was very pale. She hadn't expected Penda's death and it had hurt her. But there was nothing to do now but go through with the business.

"Who would have thought it?" she whispered. "Who would have dreamed we would ever come to this? That mighty Scotha would lie at the conqueror's feet?"

"I would," said Flandry tonelessly. "Such jerry-built empires as yours never last. Barbarians just don't have the talent and the knowledge to run them. Being only out for plunder, they don't really build.

"Of course, Scotha was especially susceptible to this kind of sabotage. Your much-vaunted honesty was your own undoing. By carefully avoiding any hint of dishonorable actions, you became completely ignorant of the techniques and the preventive measures. Your honor was never more than a latent ability for dishonor. All I had to do, essentially, was to point out to your key men the rewards of betrayal. If they'd been really honest, I'd have died at the first suggestion. Instead, they grabbed at the chance. So it was easy to set them against each other until no one knew whom he could trust." He smiled humorlessly. "Not many Scothani objected to bribery or murder or treachery when it was shown to be to their advantage. I assure you, most Terrestrials would have thought further, been able to see beyond their own noses and realized the ultimate disaster it would bring."

"Still—honor is honor, and I have lost mine and so have all my people." Gunli looked at him with a strange light in her eyes. "Dominic, disgrace can only be wiped out in blood."

He felt a sudden tightening of his nerves and muscles, an awareness of something deadly rising before him. “What do you mean?”

She had lifted the blaster from his holster and skipped out of reach before he could move. “No—stay there!” Her voice was shrill. “Dominic, you are a cunning man. But are you a brave one?”

He stood still before the menace of the weapon. “I think—” He groped for words. No, she wasn’t crazy. But she wasn’t really human, and she had the barbarian’s fanatical code in her as well. Easy, easy, or death would spit at him. “I think I took a few chances, Gunli.”

“Aye. But you never fought. You haven’t stood up man to man and battled as a warrior should.” Pain racked her thin lovely face. She was breathing hard now. “It’s for you as well as him, Dominic. He has to have his chance to avenge his father—himself—fallen Scotha—and you have to have a chance too. If you can win, then you are the stronger and have the right.”

Might makes right. It was, after all, the one unbreakable law of Scotha The old trial by combat, here on a foreign planet many lightyears from green Terra—

Cerdic came in. He had a sword in either hand, and there was a savage glee in his bloodshot eyes.

“I let him in, Dominic,” said Gunli. She was crying now. “I had to. Penda was my lord—but kill him, kill him!”

With a convulsive movement, she threw the blaster out of the window. Cerdic gave her an inquiring look. Her voice was almost inaudible: “I might not be able to stand it. I might shoot you, Cerdic.”

“Thanks!” He ripped the word out, savagely. “I’ll deal with you later, traitress. Meanwhile—” A terrible laughter bubbled in his throat— “I’ll carve your—friend—into many small pieces. Because who, among the so-civilized Terrestrials, can handle a sword?"

Gunli seemed to collapse. "O gods, O almighty gods—I didn't think of that—"

Suddenly she flung herself on Cerdic, tooth and nail and horns, snatching at his dagger. "Get him, Dominic!" she screamed. *"Get him!"*

The prince swept one brawny arm out. There was a dull smack and Gunli fell heavily to the floor.

"Now," grinned Cerdic, "choose your weapon!"

Flandry came forward and took one of the slender broadswords. Oddly, he was thinking mostly about the queen, huddled there on the floor. Poor kid, poor kid, she'd been under a greater strain than flesh and nerves were meant to bear. But give her a chance and she'd be all right.

Cerdic's eyes were almost dreamy now. He smiled as he crossed blades. "This will make up for a lot," he said. "Before you die, Terrestrial, you will no longer be a man—"

Steel rang in the great hall. Flandry parried the murderous slash and raked the prince's cheek. Cerdic roared and plunged, his blade weaving a net of death before him. Flandry skipped back, sword ringing on sword, shoulders to the wall.

They stood for an instant, straining blade against blade, sweat rivering off them, and bit by bit the Scothan's greater strength bent Flandry's arm aside. Suddenly the Terrestrial let go, striking out almost in the same moment, and the prince's steel hissed by his face.

He ran back and Cerdic rushed him again. The Scothan was wide open for the simplest stop thrust, but Flandry didn't want to kill him. They closed once more, blades clashing, and the human waited for his chance.

It came, an awkward move, and then one supremely skillful twist. Cerdic's sword went spinning out of his hand and across the room and the prince stood disarmed with Flandry's point at his throat.

For a moment he gaped in utter stupefaction. Flandry laughed harshly and said: "My dear friend, you forget that deliberate archaism is one characteristic of a decadent society. There's hardly a noble in the Empire who hasn't studied *scientific* fencing."

Defeat was heavy in the prince's defiant voice: "Kill me, then. Be done with it."

"There's been too much killing, and you can be too useful." Flandry threw his own weapon aside and cocked his fists. "But there's one thing I've wanted to do for a long, long time."

Despite the Scothan's powerful but clumsy defense, Flandry proceeded to beat the living hell out of him.

"We've saved Scotha, all Scotha," said Flandry. "Think, girl. What would have happened if you'd gone on into the Empire? Even if you'd won—and that was always doubtful, for Terra is mightier than you thought—you'd only have fallen into civil war. You just didn't have the capacity to run an empire—as witness the fact that your own allies and conquests turned on you the first chance they got. You'd have fought each other over the spoils, greater powers would have moved in, Scotha would have been ripe for sacking. Eventually you'd have gone down into Galactic oblivion. The present conflict was really quite small; it took far fewer lives than even a successful invasion of the Empire would have done. And now Terra will bring the peace you longed for, Gunli."

"Aye," she whispered. "We deserve to be conquered."

“But you aren’t,” he said. “The southerners hold Scotha now, and Terra will recognize them as the legal government—with you the queen, Gunli. You’ll be another vassal state of the Empire, yes, but with all your freedoms except the liberty to rob and kill other races. And trade with the rest of the Empire will bring you a greater and more enduring prosperity than war ever would.

“I suppose that the Empire is decadent. But there’s no reason why it can’t some day have a renaissance. When the vigorous new peoples such as yours are guided by the ancient wisdom of Terra, the Galaxy may see its greatest glory.”

She smiled at him. It was still a wan smile, but something of her old spirit was returning to her. “I don’t think the Empire is so far gone, Dominic,” she said. “Not when it has men like you.” She took his hands. “And what will you be doing now?”

He met her eyes, and there was a sudden loneliness within him. She was very beautiful.

But it could never work out. Best to leave now, before a bright memory grew tarnished with the day-to-day clashing of personalities utterly foreign to each other. She would forget him in time, find someone else, and he—well— “I have my work,” he said.

They looked up to the bright sky. Far above them, the first of the descending Imperial ships glittered in the sunlight like a falling star.

THE BIG RAIN

The room was small and bare, nothing but a ventilator grill to relieve the drabness of its plastic walls, no furniture except a table and a couple of benches. It was hot, and the cold light of fluoros glistened off the sweat which covered the face of the man who sat there alone.

He was a big man, with hard bony features under close-cropped reddish-brown hair; his eyes were gray, with something chilly in them, and moved restlessly about the chamber to assess its crude homemade look. The coverall which draped his lean body was a bit too colorful. He had fumbled a cigarette out of his belt pouch and it smoldered between his fingers, now and then he took a heavy drag on it. But he sat quietly enough, waiting.

The door opened and another man came in. This one was smaller, with bleak features. He wore only shorts to whose waistband was pinned a star-shaped badge, and a needle-gun holstered at his side, but somehow he had a military look.

“Simon Hollister?” he asked unnecessarily.

“That’s me,” said the other, rising. He loomed over the newcomer, but he was unarmed; they had searched him thoroughly the minute he disembarked.

“I am Captain Karsov, Guardian Corps.” The English was fluent, with only a trace of accent. “Sit down.” He lowered himself to a bench. “I am only here to talk to you."

Hollister grimaced. "How about some lunch?" he complained. "I haven't eaten for"—he paused a second—"thirteen hours, twenty-eight minutes."

His precision didn't get by Karsov, but the officer ignored it for the time being. "Presently," he said. "There isn't much time to lose, you know. The last ferry leaves in forty hours, and we have to find out before then if you are acceptable or must go back on it."

"Hell of a way to treat a guest," grumbled Hollister.

"We did not ask you to come," said Karsov coldly. "If you wish to stay on Venus, you had better conform to the regulations. Now, what do you think qualifies you?"

"To live here? I'm an engineer. Construction experience in the Amazon basin and on Luna. I've got papers to prove it, and letters of recommendation, if you'd let me get at my baggage."

"Eventually. What is your reason for emigrating?"

Hollister looked sullen. "I didn't like Earth."

"Be more specific. You are going to be narcoquizzed later, and the whole truth will come out. These questions are just to guide the interrogators, and the better you answer me now the quicker and easier the quiz will be for all of us."

Hollister bristled. "That's an invasion of privacy."

"Venus isn't Earth," said Karsov with an attempt at patience. "Before you were even allowed to land, you signed a waiver which puts you completely under our jurisdiction as long as you are on this planet. I could kill you, and the U.N. would not have a word to say. But we do need skilled men, and I would rather O.K. you for citizenship. Do not make it too hard for me."

"All right." Hollister shrugged heavy shoulders. "I got in a fight with a man. He died. I covered up the traces pretty well, but I could never be sure—sooner or later the police might get on to the truth, and I don't like the idea of corrective treatment. So I figured I'd better blow out whilst I was still unsuspected."

"Venus is no place for the rugged individualist, Hollister. Men have to work together, and be very tolerant of each other, if they are to survive at all."

"Yes, I know. This was a special case. The man had it coming." Hollister's face twisted. "I have a daughter—Never mind. I'd rather tell it under narco than consciously. But I just couldn't see letting a snake like that get 'corrected' and then walk around free again." Defensively: "I've always been a rough sort, I suppose, but you've got to admit this was extreme provocation."

"That is all right," said Karsov, "if you are telling the truth. But if you have family ties back on Earth, it might lessen your usefulness here."

"None," said Hollister bitterly. "Not any more." The interview went on. Karsov extracted the facts skillfully: Hollister, Simon James; born Frisco Unit, U.S.A., of good stock; chronological age, thirty-eight Earth-years; physiological age, thanks to taking intelligent advantage of bio-medics, about twenty-five; Second-class education, major in civil engineering with emphasis on nuclear-powered construction machines; work record; psych rating at last checkup; et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Somewhere a recorder took sound and visual impressions of every nuance for later analysis and filing.

At the end, the Guardian rose and stretched. "I think you will do," he said. "Come along now for the narcoquiz. It will take about three hours, and you will need another hour to recover, and then I will see that you get something to eat."

The city crouched on a mountainside in a blast of eternal wind. Overhead rolled the poisonous gray clouds; sometimes a sleet of paraformaldehyde hid the grim red slopes around, and always the scudding dust veiled men's eyes so they could not see the alkali desert below. Fantastically storm-gnawed crags loomed over the city, and often there was the nearby rumble of an avalanche, but the ledge on which it stood had been carefully checked for stability.

The city was one armored unit of metal and concrete, low and rounded as if it hunched its back against the shrieking steady gale. From its shell protruded the stacks of hundreds of outsize Hilsch tubes, swivel-mounted so that they always faced into the wind. It blew past filters which caught the flying dust and sand and tossed them down a series of chutes to the cement factory. The tubes grabbed the rushing air and separated fast and slow molecules; the cooler part went into a refrigeration system which kept the city at a temperature men could stand—outside, it hovered around the boiling point of water; the smaller volume of super-heated air was conducted to the maintenance plant where it helped run the city's pumps and generators. There were also nearly a thousand windmills, turning furiously and drinking the force of the storm.

None of this air was for breathing. It was thick with carbon dioxide; the rest was nitrogen, inert gases, formaldehyde vapor, a little methane and ammonia. The city devoted many hectares of space to hydroponic plants which renewed its oxygen and supplied some of the food, as well as to chemical purifiers, pumps and blowers. "Free as air" was a joke on Venus.

Near the shell was the spaceport where ferries from the satellite station and the big interplanetary ships landed. Pilots had to be good to bring down a vessel, or even take one up, under such conditions as prevailed here. Except for the landing cradles, the radio mast and the GCA shack in the main shell, everything was underground, as most of the city was.

Some twenty thousand colonists lived there. They were miners, engineers, laborers, technicians in the food and maintenance centers. There were three doctors, a scattering of teachers and librarians and similar personnel, a handful of police and administrators. Exactly fifteen people were employed in brewing, distilling, tavern-running, movie operation, and the other non-essential occupations which men required as they did food and air.

This was New America, chief city of Venus in 2051 A.D.

Hollister didn't enjoy his meal. He got it, cafeteria style, in one of the big plain messhalls, after a temporary ration book had been issued him. It consisted of a few vegetables, a lot of potato, a piece of the soggy yeast synthetic which was the closest to meat Venus offered—all liberally loaded with a tasteless basic food concentrate—a vitamin capsule, and a glass of flavored water. When he took out one of his remaining cigarettes, a score of eyes watched it hungrily. Not much tobacco here either. He inhaled savagely, feeling the obscure guilt of the have confronted with the have-not.

There were a number of people: in the room with him, eating their own rations. Men and women were represented about equally. All wore coveralls or the standard shorts, and most looked young, but hard too, somehow—even the women. Hollister was used to female engineers and technicians at home, but here *everybody* worked.

For the time being, he stuck to his Earthside garments.

He sat alone at one end of a long table, wondering why nobody talked to him. You'd think they would be starved for a new face and word from Earth. Prejudice? Yes, a little of that, considering the political situation; but Hollister thought something more was involved.

Fear. They were all afraid of something.

When Kaisov strolled in, the multilingual hum of conversation died, and Hollister guessed shrewdly at the fear. The Guardian made his way directly to the Earthling's place. He had a blocky, bearded man with a round smiling face in tow.

"Simon Hollister...Heinrich Gebhardt," the policeman introduced them. They shook hands, sizing each other up. Karsov sat down. "Get me the usual," he said, handing over his ration book. Gebhardt nodded and went over to the automat. It scanned the books and punched them when he had dialed his orders. Then it gave him two trays, which he carried back.

Karsov didn't bother to thank him. "I have been looking for you," he told Hollister. "Where have you been?"

"Just wandering around," said the Earthling cautiously. Inside, he felt muscles tightening, and his mind seemed to tilt forward, as if sliding off the hypnotically imposed pseudo-personality which had been meant as camouflage in the narcoquiz. "It's quite a labyrinth here."

"You should have stayed in the barracks," said Karsov. There was no expression in his smooth-boned face; there never seemed to be. "Oh, well, I wanted to say you have been found acceptable."

"Good," said Hollister, striving for imperturbability.

"I will administer the oath after lunch," said Karsov. "Then you will be a full citizen of the Venusian Federation. We do not hold with formalities, you see—no time.” He reached into a pocket and got out a booklet which he gave to Hollister. “But I advise you to study this carefully. It is a resume of the most important laws, insofar as they differ from Earth’s. Punishment for infraction is severe.”

Gebhardt looked apologetic. “It has to be,” he added. His bass voice had a slight blur and hiss of German accent, but he was good at the English which was becoming the common language of Venus. “This planet vas made in hell. If ve do not all work together, ve all die.”

“And then, of course, there is the trouble with Earth,” said Karsov. His narrow eyes studied Hollister for a long moment. “Just how do people back there feel about our declaration of independence?”

“Well—” Hollister paused. Best to tell the unvarnished truth, he decided. “Some resentment, of course. After all the money we…they…put into developing the colonies—”

“And all the resources they took out,” said Gebhardt. “Men vere planted on Venus back in the last century to mine fissionables, vich vere getting short efen then. The colonies vere made self-supporting because that vas cheaper than hauling supplies for them, vich vould haff been an impossible task anyvay. Some of the colonies vere penal, some vere manned by arbitrarily assigned personnel; the so-called democracies often relied on broken men, who could not find vork at home or who had been displaced by var. No, ve owe them notting.”

Hollister shrugged. “I’m not arguing. But people do wonder why, if you wanted national status, you didn’t at least stay with the U.N. That’s what Mars is doing.”

“Because we are…necessarily…developing a whole new civilization here, something altogether remote from anything Earth has ever seen,” snapped

Karsov. “We will still trade our fissionables for things we need, until the day we can make everything here ourselves, but we want as little to do with Earth as possible. Never mind, you will understand in time.”

Hollister’s mouth lifted in a crooked grin. There hadn’t been much Earth could do about it; in the present stage of astronautics, a military expedition to suppress the nationalists would cost more than anyone could hope to gain even from the crudest imperialism. Also, as long as no clear danger was known to exist, it wouldn’t have sat well with a planet sick of war; the dissension produced might well have torn the young world government, which still had only limited powers, apart.

But astronautics was going to progress, he thought grimly. Spaceships wouldn’t have to improve much to carry, cheaply, loads of soldiers in cold sleep, ready to land when thermonuclear bombardment from the skies had smashed a world’s civilization. And however peaceful Earth might be, she was still a shining temptation to the rest of the System, and it looked very much as if something was brewing here on Venus which could become ugly before the century was past.

Well—

“Your first assignment is already arranged,” said Karsov. Hollister jerked out of his reverie and tried to keep his fists unclenched. “Gebhardt will be your boss. If you do well, you can look for speedy promotion. Meanwhile”—he flipped a voucher across—“here is the equivalent of the dollars you had along, in our currency.”

Hollister stuck the sheet in his pouch. It was highway robbery, he knew, but he was in no position to complain and the Venusian government wanted the foreign exchange. And he could only buy trifles with it anyway; the essentials were issued without payment, the size of the ration depending on rank. Incentive bonuses were money, though, permitting you to amuse yourself but not to consume more of the scarce food or textiles or living space.

He reflected that the communist countries before World War Three had never gone this far. Here, everything was government property. The system didn't call itself communism, naturally, but it was, and probably there was no choice. Private enterprise demanded a fairly large economic surplus, which simply did not exist on Venus.

Well, it wasn't his business to criticize their internal arrangements. He had never been among the few fanatics left on Earth who still made a god of a particular economic set-up.

Gebhardt cleared his throat. "I am in charge of the atmosphere detail in this district," he said. "I am here on leafe, and vill be going back later today. Very glad to haff you, Hollister, ve are alvays short of men. Ve lost two in the last rock storm."

"Cheerful news," said the Earthman. His face resumed its hard woodenness. "Well, I didn't think Venus was going to be any bed of roses."

"It vill be," said Gebhardt. Dedication glowed on the hairy face. "Some day it vill be."

The oath was pretty drastic: in effect, Hollister put himself completely at the mercy of the Technic Board, which for all practical purposes was the city government. Each colony, he gathered, had such a body, and there was a federal board in this town which decided policy for the entire planet.

Anyone who wished to enter the government had to pass a series of rigid tests, after which there were years of apprenticeship and study, gradual promotion on the recommendation of seniors. The study was an exhausting course of history, psychotechnics, and physical science: in principle, thought Hollister, remembering some of the blubberheads who still got themselves elected at home, a good idea. The governing boards combined legislative, executive, and judicial functions, and totaled only a couple of thousand people for the whole world. It didn't seem like much for a nation of nearly two million, and the minimal paperwork surprised him—he had expected an omnipresent bureaucracy.

But of course they had the machines to serve them, recording everything in electronic files whose computers could find and correlate any data and were always checking up. And he was told pridefully that the schools were inculcating the rising generation with a tight ethic of obedience.

Hollister had supper, and returned to the Casual barracks to sleep. There were only a few men in there with him, most of them here on business from some other town. He was awakened by the alarm, whose photocells singled him out and shot forth a supersonic beam; it was a carrier wave for the harsh ringing in his head which brought him to his feet.

Gebhardt met him at an agreed-on locker room. There was a wiry, tough-looking Mongoloid with him who was introduced as Henry Yamashita. "Stow your fancy clothes, boy," boomed the chief, "and get on some TBI's." He handed over a drab, close-fitting coverall.

Hollister checked his own garments and donned the new suit wordlessly. After that there was a heavy plasticord outfit which, with boots and gloves, decked his whole body. Yamashita helped him strap on the oxygen bottles and plug in the Hilsch cooler. The helmet came last, its shoulderpiece buckled to the airsuit, but all of them kept theirs hinged back to leave their heads free.

"If somet'ing happens to our tank," said Gebhardt, "you slap that helmet down fast. Or maybe you like being embalmed. Haw!" His cheerfulness was more evident when Karsov wasn't around.

Hollister checked the valves with the caution taught him on Luna—his engineering experience was not faked. Gebhardt grunted approvingly. Then they slipped on the packs containing toilet kits, change of clothes, and emergency rations; clipped ropes, batteries, and canteens to their belts—the latter with the standard sucker tubes by which a man could drink directly even in his suit—and clumped out of the room.

A descending ramp brought them to a garage where the tanks were stored. These looked not unlike the sand-cats of Mars, but were built lower and heavier, with a refrigerating tube above and a grapple in the nose. A mechanic gestured at one dragging a covered steel wagon full of supplies, and the three men squeezed into the tiny transparent cab.

Gebhardt gunned the engine, nodding as it roared. "O.K.," he said. "On ve go."

"What's the power source?" asked Hollister above the racket.

"Alcohol," answered Yamashita. "We get it from the formaldehyde. Bottled oxygen. A compressor and cooling system to keep the oxy tanks from blowing up on us—not that they don't once in a while. Some of the newer models use a peroxide system."

"And I suppose you save the water vapor and CO2 to get the oxygen back," ventured Hollister.

"Just the water. There's always plenty of carbon dioxide." Yamashita looked out, and his face set in tight lines.

The tank waddled through the great air lock and up a long tunnel toward the surface. When they emerged, the wind was like a blow in the face. Hollister felt the machine shudder, and the demon howl drowned out the engine. He accepted the earplugs Yamashita handed him with a grateful smile.

There was dust and sand scudding by them, making it hard to see the mountainside down which they crawled. Hollister caught glimpses of naked fanglike peaks, raw slashes of ocher and blue where minerals veined the land, the steady march of dunes across the lower ledges. Overhead, the sky was an unholy tide of ragged, flying clouds, black and gray and sulfurous yellow. He could not see the sun, but the light around him was a weird hard brass color, like the light on Earth just before a thunderstorm.

The wind hooted and screamed, banging on the tank walls, yelling and rattling and groaning. Now and then a dull quiver ran through the land and trembled in Hollister's bones, somewhere an avalanche was ripping out a mountain's flanks. Briefly, a veil of dust fell so thick around them that they were blind, grinding through an elemental night with hell and the furies loose outside. The control board's lights were wan on Gebhardt's intent face, most of the time he was steering by instruments.

Once the tank lurched into a gully. Hollister, watching the pilot's lips, thought he muttered: "Damn! That vasn't here before!" He extended the grapple, clutching rock and pulling the tank and its load upward.

Yamashita clipped two small disks to his larynx and gestured at the same equipment hanging on Hollister's suit. His voice came thin but fairly clear: "Put on your talkie unit if you want to say anything." Hollister obeyed, guessing that the earplugs had a transistor arrangement powered by a piece of radioactive isotope which reproduced the vibrations in the throat.

It took concentration to understand the language as they distorted it, but he supposed he'd catch on, fast enough.

"How many hours till nightfall?" he asked.

"About twenty." Yamashita pointed to the clock on the board, it was calibrated to Venus' seventy-two-hour day. "It's around one hundred thirty kilometers to the camp, so we should just about make it by sunset."

"That isn't very fast," said Hollister. "Why not fly, or at least build roads?"

"The aircraft are all needed for speed travel and impassable terrain, and the roads will come later," said Yamashita. "These tanks can go it all right—most of the time."

"But why have the camp so far from the city?"

"It's the best location from a supply standpoint. We get most of our food from Little Moscow, and water from Hellfire, and chemicals from New America and Roger's Landing. The cities more or less specialize, you know. They have to: there isn't enough iron ore and whatnot handy to any one spot to build a city big enough to do everything by itself. So the air camps are set up at points which minimize the total distance over which supplies have to be hauled."

"You mean action distance, don't you? The product of the energy and time required for hauling."

Yamashita nodded, with a new respect in his eyes. "You'll do," he said.

The wind roared about them. It was more than just the slow rotation of the planet and its nearness to the sun which created such an incessant storm; if that had been all, there would never have been any chance of making it habitable. It was the high carbon dioxide content of the air, and its greenhouse effect; and in the long night, naked arid rock cooled off considerably. With plenty of water and vegetation, and an atmosphere similar to Earth's, Venus would have a warm but rather gentle climate on the whole, the hurricanes moderated to trade winds; indeed, with the lower Coriolis force, the destructive cyclones of Earth would be unknown.

Such, at least, was the dream of the Venusians. But looking out, Hollister realized that a fraction of the time and effort they were expending would have made the Sahara desert bloom. They had been sent here once as miners, but there was no longer any compulsion on them to stay; if they asked to come back to Earth, their appeal could not be denied however expensive it would be to ship them all home.

Then why didn't they?

Well, why go *back to a rotten civilization like*—Hollister caught himself. Sometimes his pseudomemories were real enough in him to drown out the genuine ones, rage and grief could nearly overwhelm him till he recalled that the sorrow was for people who had never existed. The anger had had to be planted deep, to get by a narcoquiz, but he wondered if it might not interfere with his mission, come the day. He grinned sardonically at himself. One man, caught on a planet at the gates of the Inferno, watched by a powerful and ruthless government embracing that entire world, and he was setting himself against it.

Most likely he would die here, and the economical Venusians would process his body for its chemicals as they did other corpses, and that would be the end of it as far as he was concerned.

Well, he quoted to himself, *a man might try.*

Gebhardt's camp was a small shell, a radio mast, and a shed sticking out of a rolling landscape of rock and sand; the rest was underground. The sun was down on a ragged horizon, dimly visible as a huge blood-red disk, when he arrived.

Yamashita and Hollister had taken their turns piloting; the Earthman found it exhausting work, and his head rang with the noise when he finally stepped out into the subterranean garage. Yamashita led him to the barracks. “We’re about fifty here,” he explained. “All men.” He grinned. “That makes a system of minor rewards and punishments based on leaves to a city *very* effective.”

The barracks was a long room with triple rows of bunks and a few tables and chairs; only Gebhardt rated a chamber of his own, though curtains on the bunks did permit some privacy. An effort had been made to brighten the place up with murals, some of which weren’t bad at all, and the men sat about reading, writing letters, talking, playing games. They were the usual conglomerate of races and nationalities, with some interesting half-breeds; hard work and a parsimonious diet had made them smaller than the average American or European, but they looked healthy enough.

“Simon Hollister, our new sub-engineer,” called Yamashita as they entered. “Just got in from Earth. Now you know as much as I do.” He flopped onto a bunk while the others drifted over. “Go ahead. Tell all. Birth, education, hobbies, religion, sex life, interests, prejudices—they’ll find it out anyway, and God knows we could use a little variety around here.” A stocky blond man paused suspiciously. “From Earth?” he asked slowly. “We’ve had no new people from Earth for thirty years. What did you want to come here for?”

“I felt like it,” snapped Hollister. “That’s enough!”

“So, a jetheading snob, huh? We’re too good for you, I guess.”

“Take it easy, Sam,” said someone else.

“Yeah,” a Negro grinned, “he might be bossin’ you, you know.”

“That’s just it,” said the blond man. “I was born here. I’ve been studying, and I’ve been on air detail for twenty years, and this bull walks right in and takes my promotion the first day.”

Part of Hollister checked off the fact that the Venusians used the terms “year” and “day” to mean those periods for their own world, one shorter and one longer than Earth’s. The rest of him tightened up for trouble, but others intervened, he found a vacant bunk and sat down on it, swinging his legs and trying to make friendly conversation. It wasn’t easy. He fell terribly alone.

Presently someone got out a steel and plastic guitar and strummed it, and soon they were all singing. Hollister listened with half an ear.

When the Big Rain comes, all the air will be good,
and the rivers all flow with beer,
with the cigarettes bloomin’ by the beefsteak bush,
and the ice-cream-bergs right here.
When the Big Rain comes, we will all be a-swillin’
of champagne, while the violin tree
plays love songs because all the gals will be willin’,
and we’ll all have a Big Rain spree!

Paradise, he thought. *They can joke about it, but it’s still the Paradise they work for and know they’ll never see. Then why* do *they work for il? What is it that’s driving them?*

After a meal, a sleep, and another meal, Hollister was given a set of blueprints to study. He bent his mind to the task, using all the powers which an arduous training had given it, and in a few hours reported to Gebhardt. “I know them,” he said.

“Already?” The chiefs small eyes narrowed. “It iss not vort’ vile trying to bluff here, boy. Venus alvays callss it.”

“I’m not bluffing,” said Hollister angrily. “If you want me to lounge around for another day, O.K., but I know those specs by heart.”

The bearded man stood up. There was muscle under his plumpness. “O.K., by damn,” he said. “You go out vit me next trip.”

That was only a few hours off. Gebhardt took a third man, a quiet grizzled fellow they called Johnny, and let Hollister drive. The tank hauled the usual wagonload of equipment, and the rough ground made piloting a harsh task. Hollister had used multiple transmissions before, and while the navigating instruments were complicated, he caught on to them quickly enough; it was the strain and muscular effort that wore him out.

Venus’ night was not the pitchy gloom one might have expected. The clouds diffused sunlight around the planet, and there was also a steady flicker of aurora even in these middle latitudes. The headlamps were needed only when they went into a deep ravine. Wind growled around them, but Hollister was getting used to that.

The first airmaker on their tour was only a dozen kilometers from the camp. It was a dark, crouching bulk on a stony ridge, its intake funnel like the rearing neck of some archaic monster. They pulled up beside it, slapped down their helmets, and went one by one through the air lock. It was a standard midget type, barely large enough to hold one man, which meant little air to be pumped out and hence greater speed in getting through. Gebhardt had told Hollister to face the exit leeward; now the three roped themselves together and stepped around the tank, out of its shelter.

Hollister lost his footing, crashed to the ground, and went spinning away in the gale. Gebhardt and Johnny dug their cleated heels in and brought the rope up short. When they had the new man back on his feet, Hollister saw them grinning behind their faceplates. Thereafter he paid attention to his balance, leaning against the wind.

Inspection and servicing of the unit was a slow task, and it was hard to see the finer parts even in the headlights' glare. One by one, the various sections were uncovered and checked, adjustments made, full gas bottles removed and empty ones substituted.

It was no wonder Gebhardt had doubted Hollister's claim. The airmaker was one of the most complicated machines in existence. A thing meant to transform the atmosphere of a planet had to be.

The intake scooped up the wind and drove it, with the help of wind-powered compressors, through a series of chambers; some of them held catalysts, some electric arcs or heating coils maintaining temperature—the continuous storm ran a good-sized generator—and some led back into others in a maze of interconnections. The actual chemistry was simple enough. Paraformaldehyde was broken down and yielded its binding water molecules; the formaldehyde, together with that taken directly from the air, reacted with ammonia and methane—or with itself—to produce a whole series of hydrocarbons, carbohydrates, and more complex compounds for food, fuel and fertilizer; such carbon dioxide as did not enter other reactions was broken down by sheer brute force in an arc to oxygen and soot. The oxygen was bottled for industrial use; the remaining substances were partly separated by distillation—again using wind power, this time to refrigerate—and collected. Further processing would take place at the appropriate cities.

Huge as the unit loomed, it seemed pathetically small when you thought of the fantastic tonnage which was the total planetary atmosphere. But more of its kind were being built every day and scattered around the surface of the world; over a million already existed, seven million was the goal, and that number should theoretically be able to do the job in another twenty Earth-years. That was theory, as Gebhardt explained over the helmet radio. Other considerations entered, such as the law of diminishing returns; as the effect of the machines became noticeable, the percentage of the air they could deal with would necessarily drop; then there was stratospheric gas, some of which apparently never got down to the surface; and the chemistry of a changing atmosphere had to be taken into account. The basic time estimate for this work had to be revised upward another decade.

There was oxygen everywhere, locked into rocks and ores, enough for the needs of man if it could be gotten out. Specially mutated bacteria were doing that job, living off carbon and silicon, releasing more gas than their own metabolisms took up; their basic energy source was the sun. Some of the oxygen recombined, of course, but not enough to matter, especially since it could only act on or near the surface and most of the bacterial gnawing went on far down. Already there was a barely detectable percentage of the element in the atmosphere. By the time the airmakers were finished, the bacteria would also be.

Meanwhile giant pulverizers were reducing barren silicone and sand to fine particles which would be mixed with fertilers to yield soil; and the genetic engineers were evolving still other strains of life which could provide a balanced ecology; and the water units were under construction.

These would be the key to the whole operation. There was plenty of water on Venus, trapped down in the body of the planet, and the volcanoes brought it up as they had done long ago on Earth. Here it was quickly snatched by the polymerizing formaldehyde, except in spots like Hellfire where machinery had been built to extract it from magma and hydrated minerals. But there was less formaldehyde in the air every day.

At the right time, hydrogen bombs were to be touched off in places the geologists had already selected, and the volcanoes would all wake up. They would spume forth plenty of carbon dioxide—though by that time the amount of the free gas would be so low that this would be welcomed—but there would be water too, unthinkable tons of water. And simultaneously aircraft would be sowing platinum catalyst in the skies, and with its help Venus' own lightning would attack the remaining poisons in the air. They would come down as carbohydrates and other compounds, washed out by the rain and leached from the sterile ground.

That would be the Big Rain. It would last an estimated ten Earth years, and at the end there would be rivers and lakes and seas on a planet which had never known them. And the soil would be spread, the bacteria and plants and small animal life released. Venus would still be mostly desert, the rains would slacken off but remain heavy for centuries, but men could walk unclothed on this world and they could piece by piece make the desert green.

A hundred years after the airmen had finished their work, the reclaimed sections might be close to Earth conditions. In five hundred years, all of Venus might be Paradise.

To Hollister it seemed like a long time to wait.

He didn't need many days to catch on to the operations and be made boss of a construction gang. Then he took out twenty men and a train of supplies and machinery, to erect still another airmaker. It was blowing hard then, too hard to set up the seal-tents which ordinarily provided a measure of comfort. Men rested in the tanks, side by side, dozing uneasily and smelling each other's sweat. They griped loudly, but endured. It was a lengthy trip to their site; eventually the whole camp was to be broken up and re-established in a better location, but meanwhile they had to accept the monotony of travel.

Hollister noticed that his men had evolved an Asian ability just to sit, without thinking, hour after hour. Their conversation and humour also suggested Asia: acrid, often brutal, though maintaining a careful surface politeness most of the time. It was probably more characteristic of this particular job than of the whole planet, though, and maybe they sloughed it off again when their hitches on air detail had expired and they got more congenial assignments.

As boss, he had the privilege of sharing his tank with only one man; he chose the wizened Johnny, whom he rather liked. Steering through a yelling sandstorm, he was now able to carry on a conversation—and it was about time, he reflected, that he got on with his real job.

"Ever thought of going back to Earth?" he asked casually.

"Back?" Johnny looked surprised. "I was born here."

"Well…going to Earth, then."

"What'd I use for passage money?"

"Distress clause of the Space Navigation Act. They'd have to give you a berth if you applied. Not that you couldn't repay your passage, with interest, in a while. With your experience here, you could get a fine post in one of the reclamation projects on Earth."

"Look," said Johnny in a flustered voice, "I'm a good Venusian. I'm needed here and I know it."

"Forget the Guardians," snapped Hollister, irritated. "I'm not going to report you. Why you people put up with a secret police anyway is more than I can understand."

"You've got to keep people in line," said Johnny. "We all got to work together to make a go of it."

"But haven't you ever thought it'd be nice to decide your own future and not have somebody to tell you what to do next?"

"It ain't just 'somebody.' It's the Board. They know how you and me fit in best. Sure, I suppose there are subversives, but I'm not one of them."

"Why don't the malcontents just run away, if they don't dare apply for passage to Earth? They could steal materials and make their own village. Venus is a big place."

"It ain't that easy. And supposin' they could and did, what'd they do then? Just sit and wait for the Big Rain? We don't want any freeloaders on Venus, mister."

Hollister shrugged. There was something about the psychology that baffled him. "I'm not preaching revolution," he said carefully. "I came here of my own free will, remember. I'm just trying to understand the set-up."

Johnny's faded eyes were shrewd on him. "You've always had it easy compared to us, I guess. It may look hard to you here. But remember, we ain't never had it different, except that things are gettin' better little by little. The food ration gets upped every so often, and we're allowed a dress suit now as well as utility clothes, and before long there's goin' to be broadcast shows to the outposts—and some day the Big Rain is comin'. Then we can all afford to take it free and easy." He paused. "That's why we broke with Earth. Why should we slave our guts out to make a good life for our grandchildren, if a bunch of freeloaders are gonna come from Earth and fill up the planet then? It's *ours.* It's gonna be the richest planet men ever saw, and it belongs to us what developed it."

Official propaganda line, thought Hollister. It sounded plausible enough till you stopped to analyze. For one thing, each country still had the right to set its own immigration policies. Furthermore, at the rate Earth was progressing, with reclamation, population control, and new resources from the oceans, by the time Venus was ripe there wouldn't be any motive to leave home—an emigration which would be too long and expensive anyway. For their own reasons, which he still had to discover, the rulers of Venus had not mentioned all the facts and had instead built up a paranoid attitude in their people.

The new airmaker site was the top of a ridge thrusting from a boulder-strewn plain. An eerie copper-colored light seemed to tinge the horizon with blood. A pair of bulldozers had already gone ahead and scooped out a walled hollow in which seal-tents could be erected; Hollister's gang swarmed from the tanks and got at that job. Then the real work began—blasting and carving a foundation, sinking piers, assembling the unit on top.

On the fourth day the rock storm came. It had dawned with an angry glow like sulfur, and as it progressed the wind strengthened and a dirty rack of clouds whipped low overhead. On the third shift, the gale was strong enough to lean against, and the sheet steel which made the unit's armour fought the men as if it lived.

The blond man, Sam Robbins, who had never liked Hollister, made his way up to the chief. His voice came over the helmet radio, dim beneath static and the drumming wind: “I don’t like this. Better we take cover fast.”

Hollister was not unwilling, but the delicate arc electrodes were being set up and he couldn’t take them down again; nor could he leave them unprotected to the scouring drift of sand. “As soon as we get the shielding up,” he said.

“I tell you, there’s no time to shield ’em!”

“Yes, there is.” Hollister turned his back. Robbins snarled something and returned to his labor.

A black wall, rust-red on the edges, was lifting to the east, the heaviest sandstorm Hollister had yet seen. He hunched his shoulders and struggled through the sleetlike dust to the unit. Tuning up his radio: “Everybody come help on this. The sooner it gets done, the sooner we can quit.”

The helmeted figures swarmed around him, battling the thunderously flapping metal sheets, holding them down by main force while they were welded to the frame. Hollister saw lightning livid across the; sky. Once a bolt flamed at the rod which protected the site. Thunder rolled and banged after it.

The wind slapped at them, and a sheet tore loose and went sailing down the hill. It struck a crag and wrapped itself around. “Robbins, Lewis, go get that!” cried Hollister, and returned attention to the piece he was clutching. An end ripped loose from his hands and tried to slash his suit.

The wind was so deafening that he couldn’t hear it rise still higher, and in the murk of sand whirling about him he was nearly blind. But he caught the first glimpse of gale-borne gravel whipping past, and heard the terror in his earphones: “Rock storm!”

The voice shut up; orders were strict that the channel be kept clear. But the gasping men labored still more frantically, while struck metal rang and boomed.

Hollister peered through the darkness. “That’s enough!” he decided. “Take cover!” Nobody dropped his tools, but they all turned fast and groped down toward the camp. The way led past the crag, where Robbins and Lewis had just quit wrestling with the stubborn plate.

Hollister didn’t see Lewis killed, but he did see him die. Suddenly his airsuit was flayed open, and there was a spurt of blood, and he toppled. The wind took his body, rolling it out of sight in the dust. *A piece of rock,* thought Hollister wildly. *It tore his suit, and he’s already embalmed—*

The storm hooted and squealed about him as he climbed the sand wall. Even the blown dust was audible, hissing against his helmet. He fumbled through utter blackness, fell over the top and into the comparative shelter of the camp ground. On hands and knees, he crawled toward the biggest of the self-sealing tents.

There was no time for niceties. They sacrificed the atmosphere within, letting the air lock stand open while they pushed inside. Had everybody made it to some tent or other? Hollister wasn’t sure, but sand was coming in, filling the shelter. He went over and closed the lock. Somebody else started the pump, using bottled nitrogen to maintain air pressure and flush out the poisons. It seemed like a long time before the oxygen containers could be opened.

Hollister took off his helmet and looked around. The tent was half filled by seven white-faced men standing in the dust. The single fluorotube threw a cold light on their sweating bodies and barred the place with shadows. Outside, the wind bellowed.

"Might as well be comfortable," said Johnny in a small voice, and began shucking his airsuit. "If the tent goes, we're all done for anyhow." He sat down on the ground and checked his equipment methodically. Then he took a curved stone and spat on it and began scouring his faceplate to remove the accumulated scratches in its hard plastic. One by one the others imitated him.

"You there!"

Hollister looked up from his own suit. Sam Robbins stood before him. The man's eyes were red and his mouth worked.

"You killed Jim Lewis."

There was murder here. Hollister raised himself till he looked down at the Venusian. "I'm sorry he's dead," he replied, trying for quietness. "He was a good man. But these things will happen."

Robbins shuddered. "You sent him down there where the gravel got him. I was there, too. Was it meant for me?"

"Nobody could tell where that chunk was going to hit," said Hollister mildly. "I could just as easily have been killed."

"I *told* you to quit half an hour before the things started."

"We couldn't quit then without ruining all our work. Sit down, Robbins. You're overtired and scared."

The men were very still sitting and watching in the thick damp heat of the tent. Thunder crashed outside.

"You rotten Earthling—" Robbins' fist lashed out. It caught Hollister on the cheekbone and he stumbled back, shaking a dazed head. Robbins advanced grinning.

Hollister felt a cold viciousness of rage. It was his pseudo-personality, he realized dimly, but no time to think of that now. As Robbins closed in, he crouched and punched for the stomach.

Hard muscle met him. Robbins clipped him on the jaw. Hollister tried an uppercut, but it was skillfully blocked. This man knew how to fight. Hollister gave him another fusillade in the belly. Robbins grunted and rabbit-punched. Hollister caught it on his shoulder, reached up, grabbed an arm, and whirled his enemy over his head. Robbins hit a bunkframe that buckled under him.

He came back, dizzy but game. Hollister was well trained in combat. But it took him a good ten minutes to stretch his man bleeding on the ground.

Panting, he looked about him. There was no expression on the faces that ringed him in. "Anybody else?" he asked hoarsely.

"No, boss," said Johnny. "You're right, o' course. I don't think nobody else here wants twenty lashes back at base."

"Who said—" Hollister straightened, blinking. "Lashes?"

"Why, sure. This was mutiny, you know. It's gotta be punished." Hollister shook his head. "Too barbaric. Correction—"

"Look, boss," said Johnny, "you're a good engineer but you don't seem to understand much about Venus yet. We ain't got the time or the manpower or the materials to spend on them there corrective jails. A bull what don't keep his nose clean gets the whip or the sweatbox, and then back to the job. The really hard cases go to the uranium mines at Lucifer." He shivered, even in the dense heat.

Hollister frowned. "Not a bad system," he said, to stay in character. "But I think Robbins here has had enough. I'm not going to report him if he behaves himself from now on, and I'll trust the rest of you to cooperate."

They mumbled assent. He wasn’t sure whether they respected him for it or not, but the boss was boss. Privately, he suspected that the Boards must frame a lot of men, or at least sentence them arbitrarily for minor crimes, to keep the mines going; there didn’t seem to be enough rebellion in the Venusian character to supply them otherwise.

Chalk up another point for the government. The score to settle was getting rather big.

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Time was hard to estimate on Venus; it wasn’t only that they had their own calendar here, but one day was so much like another. Insensibly and despite himself, Hollister began sliding into the intellectual lethargy of the camp. He had read the few books—and with his trained memory, he could only read a book once—and he knew every man there inside out, and he had no family in one of the cities to write to and think about. The job itself presented a daily challenge, no two situations were ever quite the same and occasionally he came near death, but outside of it there was a tendency to stagnate.

The other two engineers, Gebhardt and Yamashita, were pleasant company. The first was from HÖrselberg, which had been a German settlement and still retained some character of its own, and he had interesting stories to tell of it; the second, though of old Venus-American stock, was mentally agile for a colonist, had read more than most and had a lively interest in the larger world of the Solar System. But even the stimulation they offered wore a little thin in six months or so.

The region spun through a “winter” that was hardly different from summer except in having longer nights, and the sterile spring returned, and the work went on. Hollister's time sense ticked off days with an accuracy falling within a few seconds, and he wondered how long he would be kept here and when he would get a chance to report to his home office. That would be in letters ostensibly to friends, which one of the spaceships would carry back; he knew censors would read them first, but his code was keyed to an obscure eighteenth-century book he was certain no one on Venus had ever heard of.

Already he knew more about this planet than anyone on Earth. It had always been too expensive to send correspondents here, and the last couple of U.N. representatives hadn't found much to tell. The secretiveness toward Earthmen might be an old habit, going back to the ultranationalistic days of the last century. Colony A and Colony B, of two countries which at home might not be on speaking terms, were not supposed to give aid and comfort to each other; but on Venus such artificial barriers had to go if anyone was to survive. Yamashita told with relish how prospectors from Little Moscow and Trollen had worked together and divided up their finds. But of course, you couldn't let your nominal rulers know—

Hollister was beginning to realize that the essential ethos of Venus was, indeed, different from anything which existed on Earth. It had to be, the landscape had made it so. Man was necessarily a more collective creature than at home. That helped explain the evolution of the peculiar governmental forms and the patience of the citizenry toward the most outrageous demands. Even the dullest laborer seemed to live in the future.

Our children and grandchildren will build the temples, read the books, write the music. Ours is only to lay the foundation.

And was that why they stuck here, instead of shipping back and turning the whole job over to automatic machinery and a few paid volunteers? They had been the lonely, the rejected, the dwellers in outer darkness, for a long time; now they could not let go of their fierce and angry pride, even when there was no more need for it. Hollister thought about Ireland. Man is not a logical animal.

Still, there were features of Venusian society that struck him as unnecessary and menacing. Something would have to be done about them, though as yet he wasn't sure what it would be.

He worked, and he gathered impressions and filed them away, and he waited. And at last the orders came through. This camp had served its purpose, it was to be broken up and replanted elsewhere, but first its personnel were to report to New America and get a furlough. Hollister swung almost gaily into the work of dismantling everything portable and loading it in the wagons. Maybe he finally was going to get somewhere.

He reported at the Air Control office with Gebhardt and Yamashita, to get his pay and quarters assignment.

The official handed him a small card. "You've been raised to chief engineer's rank," he said. "You'll probably get a camp of your own next time." Gebhardt pounded him on the back. "Ach, *sehr gut!* I recommended you, boy, you did fine, but I am going to miss you."

"Oh…we'll both be around for a while, won't we?" asked Hollister uncomfortably.

"Not I! I haff vife and kids. I hop the next rocket to Hörselberg."

Yamashita had his own family in town, and Hollister didn't want to intrude too much on them. He wandered off, feeling rather lonesome.

His new rating entitled him to private quarters, a tiny room with minimal furniture, though he still had to wash and eat publicly like everyone else except the very top. He sat down in it and began composing the planned letters.

There was a knock at the door. He fumbled briefly, being used to scanners at home and not used to doors on Venus, and finally said: “Come in.”

A woman entered. She was young, quite good-looking, with a supple tread and spectacularly red hair. Cool green eyes swept up and down his height. “My name is Barbara Brandon,” she said. “Administrative assistant in Air Control.”

“Oh...hello.” He offered her the chair. “You’re here on business?”

Amusement tinged her impersonal voice. “In a way. I’m going to many you.”

Hollister’s jaw did not drop, but it tried. “Come again?” he asked weakly.

She sat down. “It’s simple enough. I’m thirty-seven years old, which is almost the maximum permissible age of celibacy except in special cases.” With a brief, unexpectedly feminine touch: “That’s Venus years, of course! I’ve seen you around, and looked at your record; good heredity there, I think. Pops O.K.’d it genetically—that’s Population Control—and the Guardians cleared it, too.”

“Um-m-m...look here.” Hollister wished there were room to pace. He settled for sitting on the table and swinging his legs. “Don’t I get any say in the matter?”

“You can file any objections, of course, and probably they’d be heeded; but you’ll have to have children by someone pretty soon. We need them. Frankly, I think a match between us would be ideal. You’ll be out in the field so much that we won’t get in each other’s hair, and we’d probably get along well enough while we are together.”

Hollister scowled. It wasn’t the morality of it—much. He was a bachelor on Earth, secret service Un-men really had no business getting married;

and in any case the law would wink at what he had done on Venus if he ever got home. But something about the whole approach annoyed him.

“I can’t see where you need rules to make people breed,” he said coldly. “They’ll do that anyway. You don’t realize what a struggle it is on Earth to bring the population back down toward a sensible figure.”

“Things are different here,” answered Barbara Brandon in a dry tone. “We’re going to need plenty of people for a long time to come, and they have to be of the right stock. The congenitally handicapped can’t produce enough to justify their own existence; there’s been a program of euthanasia there, as you may know. But the new people are also needed in the right places. This town, for instance, can only accommodate so much population increase per year. We can’t send surplus children off to a special creche because there aren’t enough teachers or doctors—or anything, so the mothers have to take care of all their own kids; or the fathers, if they happen to have a job in town and the mother is a field worker. The whole process has *got* to be regulated.”

“Regulations!” Hollister threw up his hands. “Behold the bold frontiersman!”

The girl looked worried. “Careful what you say.” She smiled at him with a touch of wistfulness. “It needn’t be such a hindrance to you. Things are… pretty free except where the production of children is involved.”

“I—this is kind of sudden.” Hollister tried to smile back. “Don’t think I don’t appreciate the compliment. But I need time to think, adjust myself—Look, are you busy right now?”

“No, I’m off.”

“All right. Put on your party clothes and we’ll go out and have some drinks and talk the matter over.”

She glanced shyly at the thin, colored coverall she wore. “These are my party clothes,” she said.

Hollister’s present rank let him visit another bar than the long, crowded room where plain laborers caroused. This one had private tables, decorations, music in the dim dusky air. It was quiet, the engineer aristocracy had their own code of manners. A few couples danced on a small floor.

He found an unoccupied table by the curving wall, sat down, and dialed for drinks and cigarettes. Neither were good enough to justify their fantastic cost but it had been a long time since he had enjoyed any luxuries at all. He felt more relaxed with them. The girl looked quite beautiful in the muted light.

“You were born here, weren’t you, Barbara?” he asked after a while.

“Of course,” she said. “You’re the first immigrant in a long time. Used to be some deportees coming in every once in a while, but—”

“I know. ‘Sentence suspended on condition you leave Earth.’ That was before all countries had adopted the new penal code. Never mind. I was just wondering if you wouldn’t like to see Earth—sometime.”

“Maybe. But I’m needed here, not there. And I like it.” There was a hint of defiance in the last remark.

He didn’t press her. The luminous murals showed a soft unreal landscape of lakes and forests, artificial stars twinkled gently in the ceiling. “Is this what you expect Venus to become?” he asked.

“Something like this. Probably not the stars, it’ll always be cloudy here but they’ll be honest rain clouds. We should live to see the beginning of it.”

“Barbara,” he asked, “do you believe in God?”

“Why, no. Some of the men are priests and rabbis and whatnot in their spare time, but—no, not I. What about it?”

“You’re wrong,” he said. “Venus is your god. This is a religious movement you have here, with a slide rule in its hand.”

“So—?” She seemed less assured, he had her off balance and the green eyes were wide and a little frightened.

“An Old Testament god,” he pursued, “merciless, all-powerful, all-demanding. Get hold of a Bible if you can, and read Job and Ecclesiastes. You’ll see what I mean. When is the New Testament coming…or even the prophet Micah?”

“You’re a funny one,” she said uncertainly. Frowning, trying to answer him on his own terms: “After the Big Rain, things will be easier. It’ll be—” She struggled through vague memories. “It’ll be the Promised Land.”

“You’ve only got this one life,” he said. “Is there any sound reason for spending it locked in these iron boxes, with death outside, when you could lie on a beach on Earth and everything you’re fighting for is already there?”

She grabbed his hand where it lay on the table. Her fingers were cold, and she breathed fast. “No! Don’t say such things! You’re here too. You came here—”

Get thee behind me, Satan.

“Sorry.” He lifted his glass. “Here’s freefalling.”

She clinked with him smiling shakily. “There isn’t any retirement on Venus, is there?” he asked.

“Not exactly. Old people get lighter work, of course. When you get too old to do anything…well, wouldn’t you want euthanasia?”

He nodded, quite sincerely, though his exact meaning had gone by her. "I was just thinking of…shall we say us…rose-covered cottages, sunset of life. Darby and Joan stuff."

She smiled, and reached over to stroke his cheek lightly. "Thanks," she murmured. "Maybe there will be rose-covered cottages by the time we're that old."

Hollister turned suddenly, aware with his peripheral senses of the man who approached. Or maybe it was the sudden choking of of low-voiced conversation in the bar. The man walked very softly up to their table and stood looking down on them. Then he pulled out the extra chair for himself.

"Hello, Karsov," said Hollister dully.

The Guardian nodded. There was a ghostly smile playing about his lips. "How are you?" he asked, with an air of not expecting a reply. "I am glad you did so well out there. Your chief recommended you very highly."

"Thanks," said Hollister, not hiding the chill in his voice. He didn't like the tension he could see in Barbara.

"I just happened by and thought you would like to know you will have a crew of your own next trip," said the policeman. "That is, the Air Control office has made a recommendation to me." He glanced archly at Barbara. "Did you by any chance have something to do with that, Miss Brandon? Could be!" Then his eyes fell to the cigarettes, and he regarded them pointedly till Barbara offered him one.

"Pardon me." Hollister held his temper with an effort and kept his voice urbane. "I'm still new here, lot of things I don't know. Why does your office have to pass on such a matter?"

"My office has to pass on everything," said Karsov.

“Seems like a purely technical business as long as my own record is clean.”

Karsov shook his sleek head. “You do not understand. We cannot have someone in a responsible position who is not entirely trustworthy. It is more than a matter of abstaining from criminal acts. You have to be with us all the way. No reservations. That is what Psych Control and the Guardians exist for.”

He blew smoke through his nose and went on in a casual tone: “I must say your attitude has not been entirely pleasing. You have made some remarks which could be…misconstrued. I am ready to allow for your not being used to Venusian conditions, but you know the law about sedition.”

For a moment, Hollister savored the thought of Karsov’s throat between his fingers. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Remember, there are recorders everywhere, and we make spot checks directly on people, too. You could be narcoquizzed again any time I ordered it. But I do not think that will be necessary just yet. A certain amount of grumbling is only natural, and if you have any genuine complaints you can file them with your local Technic Board.”

Hollister weighed the factors in his mind. Karsov packed a gun, and—But too sudden a meekness could be no less suspicious. “I don’t quite understand why you have to have a political police,” he ventured. “It seems like an ordinary force should be enough. After all…where would an insurrectionist go?”

He heard Barbara’s tiny gasp, but Karsov merely looked patient. “There are many factors involved,” said the Guardian. “For instance, some of the colonies were not quite happy with the idea of being incorporated into the Venusian Federation. They preferred to stay with their mother countries, or even to be independent. Some fighting ensued, and they must still be watched. Then, too, it is best to keep Venusian society healthy while it is new and vulnerable to subversive radical ideas. And finally, the Guardian Corps is the nucleus of our future army and space navy."

Hollister wondered if he should ask why Venus needed military forces, but decided against it. The answer would only be some stock phrase about terrestrial imperialists, if he got any answer at all. He'd gone about far enough already.

"I see," he said. "Thanks for telling me."

"Would you like a drink, sir?" asked Barbara timidly.

"No," said Karsov. "I only stopped in on my way elsewhere. Work, always work." He got up. "I think you are making a pretty good adjustment, Hollister. Just watch your tongue…and your mind. Oh, by the way. Under the circumstances, it would be as well if you did not write any letters home for a while. That could be misunderstood. You may use one of the standard messages. They are much cheaper, too." He nodded and left.

Hollister's eyes followed him out. *How much does he know?*

"Come on," said Barbara. There was a little catch in her voice. "Let's dance."

Gradually they relaxed, easing into the rhythm of the music. Hollister dismissed the problem of Karsov for the time being, and bent mind and senses to his companion. She was lithe and slim in his arms, and he felt the stirrings of an old hunger in him.

The next Venus day he called on Yamashita. They had a pleasant time together, and arranged a party for later; Hollister would bring Barbara. But as he was leaving, the Venusian drew him aside.

“Be careful, Si,” he whispered. “They were here a few hours after I got back, asking me up and down about you. I had to tell the truth, they know how to ask questions and if I’d hesitated too much it would have been narco. I don’t think you’re in any trouble, but be careful!”

Barbara had arranged her vacation to coincide with his—efficient girl! They were together most of the time. It wasn’t many days before they were married. That was rushing things, but Hollister would soon be back in the field for a long stretch and—well—they had fallen in love. Under the circumstances, it was inevitable. Curious how it broke down the girl’s cool self-possession, but that only made her more human and desirable.

He felt a thorough skunk, but maybe she was right. *Carpe diem.* If he ever pulled out of this mess, he’d just have to pull her out with him; meanwhile, he accepted the additional complication of his assignment. It looked as if that would drag on for years, anyhow; maybe a lifetime.

They flew themselves to a short honeymoon at a high-class—and expensive—resort by Thunder Gorge, one of Venus’ few natural beauty spots. The atmosphere at the lodge was relaxed, not a Guardian in sight and more privacy than elsewhere on the planet. Psych Control was shrewd enough to realize that people needed an occasional surcease from all duty, some flight from the real world of sand and stone and steel. It helped keep them sane.

Even so, there was a rather high proportion of mental disease. It was a taboo subject, but Hollister got a doctor drunk and wormed the facts out of him. The psychotic were not sent back to Earth, as they could have been at no charge; they might talk too much. Nor were there facilities for proper treatment on Venus. If the most drastic procedures didn’t restore a patient to some degree of usefulness in a short time—they had even revived the barbarism of prefrontal lobotomy!—he was quietly gassed.

"But it'll all be diff 'rent af 'er uh Big Rain," said the doctor. "My son ull have uh real clinic, he will."

More and more, Hollister doubted it.

A few sweet crazy days, and vacation's end was there and they took the rocket back to New America. It was the first time Hollister had seen Barbara cry.

He left her sitting forlornly in the little two-room apartment they now rated, gathering herself to arrange the small heap of their personal possessions, and reported to Air Control. The assistant super gave him a thick, bound sheaf of papers.

"Here are the orders and specs," he said. "You can have two days to study them." Hollister, who could memorize the lot in a few hours, felt a leap of gladness at the thought of so much free time. The official leaned back in his chair. He was a gnarled old man, retired to a desk after a lifetime of field duty. One cheek was puckered with the scars of an operation for the prevalent HR cancer; Venus had no germs, but prepared her own special death traps. "Relax for a minute and I'll give you the general idea."

He pointed to a large map on the wall. It was not very complete or highly accurate: surveying on this planet was a job to break a man's heart, and little had been done. "We're establishing your new camp out by Last Chance. You'll note that Little Moscow, Trollen, and Roger's Landing cluster around it at an average distance of two hundred kilometers, so that's where you'll be getting your supplies, sending men on leave, and so forth. I doubt if you'll have any occasion to report back here till you break camp completely in a couple of years."

And Barbara will be here alone, Barbara and our child whom I won't even see—

"You'll take your wagon train more or less along this route," went on the super, indicating a dotted line that ran from New America. "It's been gone over and is safe. Notice the eastward jog to Lucifer at the halfway point. That's to refuel and take on fresh food stores." Hollister frowned, striving for concentration on the job. "I can't see that. Why not take a few extra wagons and omit the detour?"

"Orders," said the super.

Whose orders? Karsov's? I'll bet my air helmet!—but why?

"Your crew will be...kind of tough," said the old man. "They're mostly from Ciudad Alcazar, which is on the other side of the world. It was one of the stubborn colonies when we declared independence, had to be put down by force, and it's still full of sedition. These spigs are all hard cases who've been assigned to this hemisphere so they won't stir up trouble at home. I saw in your dossier that you speak Spanish, among other languages, which is one reason you're being given this bunch. You'll have to treat them rough, remember. Keep them in line."

I think there was more than one reason behind this.

"The details are all in your assignment book," said the super. "Report back here in two days, this time. O.K.—have fun!" He smiled, suddenly friendly now that his business was completed.

Darkness and a whirl of poison sleet turned the buildings into crouching black monsters, hardly to be told from the ragged snarl of crags which ringed them in. Hollister brought his tank to a grinding halt before a tower which fixed him with a dazzling floodlight eye. “Sit tight, Diego,” he said, and slapped his helmet down.

His chief assistant, Fernandez, nodded a sullen dark head. He was competent enough, and had helped keep the unruly crew behaving itself, but remained cold toward his boss. There was always a secret scorn in his eyes.

Hollister wriggled through the airlock and dropped to the ground. A man in a reinforced, armorlike suit held a tommy-gun on him, but dropped the muzzle as he advanced. The blast of white light showed a stupid face set in lines of habitual brutality. “You the airman come for supplies?” he asked.

“Yes. Can I see your chief?”

The guard turned wordlessly and led the way. Beyond the lock of the main shell was a room where men sat with rifles. Hollister was escorted to an inner office, where a middle-aged, rather mild-looking fellow in Guardian uniform greeted him. “How do you do? We had word you were coming. The supplies were brought to our warehouse and you can load them when you wish.”

Hollister accepted a chair. “I’m Captain Thomas,” the other continued. “Nice to have you. We don’t see many new faces at Lucifer—not men you can talk to, anyway. How are things in New America?”

He gossiped politely for a while. “It’s quite a remarkable installation we have here,” he ended. “Would you like to see it?”

Hollister grimaced. “No, thanks.”

“Oh, I really must insist. You and your chief assistant and one or two of the foremen. They’ll all be interested, and can tell the rest of your gang how it is. There’s so little to talk about in camp.”

Hollister debated refusing outright and forcing Thomas to show his hand. But why bother? Karsov had given orders, and Thomas would conduct him around at gun point if necessary. “O.K., thanks,” he said coldly. “Let me get my men bunked down first, though.”

“Of course. We have a spare barracks for transients. I’ll expect you in two hours...with three of your men, remember.”

Diego Fernandez only nodded when Hollister gave him the news. The chief skinned his teeth in a bleak sort of grin. “Don’t forget to ‘oh’ and ‘ah,’ ” he said. “Our genial host will be disappointed if you don’t, and he’s a man I’d hate to disappoint.”

The smoldering eyes watched him with a quizzical expression that faded back into blankness. “I shall get Gomez and San Rafael,” said Fernandez. “They have strong stomachs.”

Thomas received them almost unctuously and started walking down a series of compartments. “As engineers, you will be most interested in the mine itself,” he said. “I’ll show you a little of it. This is the biggest uranium deposit known in the Solar System.”

He led them to the great cell block, where a guard with a shock gun fell in behind them. “Have to be careful,” said Thomas. “We’ve got some pretty desperate characters here, who don’t feel they have much to lose.”

“All lifers, eh?” asked Hollister.

Thomas looked surprised. “Of course! We couldn’t let them go back after what the radiation does to their germ plasm.”

A man rattled the bars of his door as they passed. “I’m from New America!” His harsh scream bounded between steel walls. “Do you know my wife? Is Martha Riley all right?”

"Shut up!" snapped the guard, and fed him a shock beam. He lurched back into the darkness of his cell. His mate, whose face was disfigured by a cancer, eased him to his bunk.

Someone else yelled, far down the long white-lit rows. A guard came running from that end. The voice pleaded: "It's a nightmare. It's just a nightmare. The stuff s got intuh muh brain and I'm always dreamin' nightmares—"

"They get twitchy after a while," said Thomas. "Stuff *will* seep through the suits and lodge in their bodies. Then they're not much good for anything but pick-and-shovel work. Don't be afraid, gentlemen, we have reinforced suits for the visitors and guards."

These were donned at the end of the cell block. Beyond the double door, a catwalk climbed steeply, till they were on the edge of an excavation which stretched farther than they could see in the gloom.

"It's rich enough yet for open-pit milling," said Thomas, "though we're driving tunnels, too." He pointed to a giant scooper. Tiny shapes of convicts scurried about it. "Four-hour shifts because of the radiation down there. Don't believe those rumors that we aren't careful with our boys. Some of them live for thirty years."

Hollister's throat felt cottony. It would be so easy to rip off Thomas' air hose and kick him down into the pit!

"What about women prisoners?" he asked slowly. "You must get some."

"Oh, yes. Right down there with the men. We believe in equality on Venus."

There was a strangled sound in the earphones, but Hollister wasn't sure which of his men had made it.

"Very essential work here," said Thomas proudly. "We refine the ore right on the spot too, you know. It not only supplies such nuclear power as Venus needs, but exported to Earth it buys the things we still have to have from them."

"Why operate it with convict labor?" asked Hollister absently. His imagination was wistfully concentrated on the image of himself branding his initials on Thomas' anatomy. "You could use free men, taking proper precautions, and it would be a lot more efficient and economical of manpower."

"You don't understand." Thomas seemed a bit shocked. "These are enemies of the state."

I've read that line in the history hooks. Some state, if it makes itself that many enemies!

"The refinery won't interest you so much," said Thomas. "Standard procedure, and it's operated by nonpolitical prisoners under shielding. They got skilled, and become too valuable to lose. But no matter who a man is, how clever he is, if he's been convicted of treason he goes to the mine."

So this was a warning—or was it a provocation?

When they were back in the office, Thomas smiled genially. "I hope you gentlemen have enjoyed the tour," he said. "Do stop in and see me again sometime." He held out his hand. Hollister turned on his heel, ignoring the gesture, and walked out.

Even in the line of duty, a man can only do so much.

Somewhat surprisingly Hollister found himself getting a little more popular with his crew after the visit to Lucifer. The three who were with him must have seen his disgust and told about it. He exerted himself to win more of their friendship, without being too obtrusive about it: addressing them politely, lending a hand himself in the task of setting up camp, listening carefully to complaints about not feeling well instead of dismissing them all as malingering. That led to some trouble. One laborer who was obviously faking a stomach-ache was ordered back to the job and made an insulting crack. Hollister knocked him to the floor with a single blow. Looking around at the others present, he said slowly: "There will be no whippings in this camp, because I do not believe men should be treated thus. But I intend to remain chief and to get this business done." Nudging the fallen man with his foot: "Well, go on back to your work. This is forgotten also in the records I am supposed to keep."

He didn't feel proud of himself—the man had been smaller and weaker than he. But he had to have discipline, and the Venusians all seemed brutalized to a point where the only unanswerable argument was force. It was an inevitable consequence of their type of government, and boded ill for the future.

Somewhat later, his radio-electronics technie, Valdez—a soft-spoken little fellow who did not seem to have any friends in camp-—found occasion to speak with him. "It seems that you have unusual ideas about running this operation, señor," he remarked.

"I'm supposed to get the airmakers installed," said Hollister. "That part of it is right on schedule."

"I mean with regard to your treatment of the men, señor. You are the mildest chief they have had. I wish to say that it is appreciated, but some of them are puzzled. If I may give you some advice, which is doubtless not needed, it would be best if they knew exactly what to expect."

Hollister felt bemused. “Fairness, as long as they do their work. What is so strange about that?”

“But some of us…them…have unorthodox ideas about politics.”

“That is their affair, Señor Valdez.” Hollister decided to make himself a little more human in the technie’s eyes. “I have a few ideas of my own, too.”

“Ah, so. Then you will permit free discussion in the barracks?”

“Of course.”

“I have hidden the recorder in there very well. Do you wish to hear the tapes daily, or shall I just make a summary?”

“I don’t want to hear any tapes,” stated Hollister. “That machine will not be operated.”

“But they might plan treason!”

Hollister laughed and swept his hand around the wall. “In the middle *of that?* Much good their plans do them!” Gently: “All of you may say what you will among yourselves. I am an engineer, not a secret policeman.”

“I see, señor. You are very generous. Believe me, it is appreciated.”

Three days later, Valdez was dead.

Hollister had sent him out with a crew to run some performance tests on the first of the new airmakers. The men came back agitatedly, to report that a short, sudden rock storm had killed the technie. Hollister frowned, to cover his pity for the poor lonely little guy. “Where is the body?” he asked. “Out there, señor—where else?”

Hollister knew it was the usual practice to leave men who died in the field where they fell; after Venusian conditions had done their work, it wasn't worthwhile salvaging the corpse for its chemicals. But—"Have I not announced my policy?" he snapped. "I thought that you people, of all, would be glad of it. Dead men will be kept here, so we can haul them into town and have them properly buried. Does not your religion demand that?"

"But Valdez, señor—"

"Never mind! Back you go, at once, and this time bring him in." Hollister turned his attention to the problem of filling the vacancy. Control wasn't going to like him asking for another so soon; probably he couldn't get one anyway. Well, he could train Fernandez to handle the routine parts, and do the more exacting things himself.

He was sitting in his room that night, feeling acutely the isolation of a commander—too tired to add another page to his letter to Barbara, not tired enough to go to sleep. There was a knock on the door. His start told him how thin his nerves were worn. "Come in!"

Diego Fernandez entered. The chill white fluorolight showed fear in his eyes and along his mouth. "Good evening, Simon," he said tonelessly. They had gotten to the stage of first names, though they still addressed each other with the formal pronoun.

"Good evening, Diego. What is it?"

The other bit his lip and looked at the floor. Hollister did not try to hurry him. Outside, the wind was running and great jags of lightning sizzled across an angry sky, but this room was buried deep and very quiet.

Fernandez's eyes rose at last. "There is something you ought to know, Simon. Perhaps you already know it."

"And perhaps not, Diego. Say what you will. There are no recorders here."

"Well, then, Valdez was not accidentally killed. He was murdered."

Hollister sat utterly still.

"You did not look at the body very closely, did you?" went on Fernandez, word by careful word. "I have seen suits torn open by flying rocks. This was not such a one. Some instrument did it…a compressed-air drill, I think."

"And do you know why it was done?"

"Yes." Fernandez's face twisted. "I cannot say it was not a good deed. Valdez was a spy for the government."

Hollister felt a knot in his stomach. "How do you know this?"

"One can be sure of such things. After the…the Venusians had taken Alcazar, Valdez worked eagerly with their police. He had always believed in confederation and planetary independence. Then he went away, to some engineering assignment it was said. But he had a brother who was proud of the old hidalgo blood, and this brother sought to clear the shame of his family by warning that Valdez had taken a position with the Guardians. He told it secretly, for he was not supposed to, but most of Alcazar got to know it. The men who had fought against the invaders were sent here, to the other side of the world, and it is not often we get leave to go home even for a short while. But we remembered, and we knew Valdez when he appeared on this job. So when those men with him had a chance to revenge themselves, they took it."

Hollister fixed the brown eyes with his own. "Why do you tell me this?" he asked.

"I do not—quite know. Except that you have been a good chief. It would be best for us if we could keep you, and this may mean trouble for you."

I'll say! First I practically told Valdez how I feel about the government, then he must have transmitted it with the last radio report, and now he's *dead.* Hollister chose his words cautiously: “Have you thought that the best way I can save myself is to denounce those men?”

“They would go to Lucifer, Simon.”

“I know.” He weighed the factors, surprised at his own detached calm. On the one hand there were Barbara and himself, and his own mission; on the other hand were half a dozen men who would prove most valuable come the day—for it was becoming more and more clear that the sovereign state of Venus would have to be knocked down, the sooner the better.

Beyond a small ache, he did not consider the personal element; Un-man training was too strong in him for that. A melody skipped through his head. *“Here’s a how-dedo—”* It was more than a few men, he decided; this whole crew, all fifty or so, had possibilities. A calculated risk was in order.

“I did not hear anything you said,” he spoke aloud. “Nor did you ever have any suspicions. It is obvious that Valdez died accidentally—too obvious to question.”

Fernandez’s smile flashed through the sweat that covered his lace. “Thank you, Simon!”

“Thanks to *you,* Diego.” Hollister gave him a drink—the boss was allowed a few bottles—and sent him on his way.

The boss was also allowed a .45 magnum automatic, the only gun in camp. Hollister took it out and checked it carefully. What was that classic verdict of a coroner’s jury, a century or more ago in the States? “An act of God under very suspicious circumstances.” He grinned to himself. It was not a pleasant expression.

The rocket landed three days later. Hollister, who had been told by radio to expect it but not told why, was waiting outside. A landing space had been smoothed off and marked, and he had his men standing by and the tanks and bulldozers parked close at hand. Ostensibly that was to give any help which might be needed; actually, he hoped they would mix in on his side if trouble started. Power-driven sand blasts and arc welders were potentially nasty weapons, and tanks and 'dozers could substitute for armored vehicles in a pinch. The gun hung at his waist.

There was a mild breeze, for Venus, but it drove a steady scud of sand across the broken plain. The angry storm-colored light was diffused by airborne dust till it seemed to pervade the land, and even through his helmet and earphones Hollister was aware of the wind-yammer and the remote banging of thunder.

A new racket grew in heaven, stabbing jets and then the downward hurtle of sleek metal. The rocket's glider wings were fully extended, braking her against the updraft, and the pilot shot brief blasts to control his yawing vessel and bring her down on the markings. Wheels struck the hard-packed sand, throwing up a wave of it; landing flaps strained, a short burst from the nose jet arched its back against the flier's momentum, and then the machine lay still.

Hollister walked up to it. Even with the small quick-type air lock, he had to wait a couple of minutes before two suited figures emerged. One was obviously the pilot; the other—

"Barbara!"

Her face had grown thin, he saw through the helmet plate, and the red hair was disordered. He pulled her to him, and felt his faceplate clank on hers. "Barbara! What brings you here? Is everything all right?"

She tried to smile. “Not so public. Let’s get inside.”

The pilot stayed, to direct the unloading of what little equipment had been packed along; a trip was never wasted. Fernandez could do the honors afterward. Hollister led his wife to his own room, and no words were said for a while.

Her lips and hands felt cold.

“What is it, Barbara?” he asked when he finally came up for air. “How do we rate this?”

She didn’t quite meet his eyes. “Simple enough. We’re not going to have a baby after all. Since you’ll be in the field for a long time, and I’m required to be a mother soon, it…it wasn’t so hard to arrange a leave for me. I’ll be here for ten days.”

That was almost an Earth month. The luxury was unheard-of. Hollister sat down on his bunk and began to think.

“What’s the matter?” She rumpled his hair. “Aren’t you glad to see me? Maybe you have a girl lined up in Trollen?”

Her tone wasn’t quite right, somehow. In many ways she was still a stranger to him, but he knew she wouldn’t banter him with just that inflection. Or did she really think—“I’d no such intention,” he said.

“Of course not, you jethead! I trust you.” Barbara stretched herself luxuriously. “Isn’t this wonderful?”

Yeah…too wonderful. “Why do we get it?”

“I told you.” She looked surprised. “We’ve got to have a child.”

He said grimly, “I can’t see that it’s so all-fired urgent. If it were, it’d be easier, and right in line with the Board’s way of thinking, to use artificial insemination.” He stood up and gripped her shoulders and looked straight at her. “Barbara, why are you really here?”

She began to cry, and that wasn’t like her either. He patted her and mumbled awkward phrases, feeling himself a louse. But something was very definitely wrong, and he had to find out what.

He almost lost his resolution as the day went on. He had to be outside most of that time, supervising and helping; he noticed that several of the men had again become frigid with him. Was that Karsov’s idea—to drive a wedge between him and his crew by giving him an unheard-of privilege? Well, maybe partly, but it could not be the whole answer. When he came back, Barbara had unpacked and somehow, with a few small touches, turned his bleak little bedroom-office into a home. She was altogether gay and charming and full of hope.

The rocket had left, the camp slept, they had killed a bottle to celebrate and now they were alone in darkness. In such a moment of wonder, it was hard to keep a guard up.

“Maybe you appreciate the Board a little more,” she sighed. “They aren’t machines. They’re human, and know that we are too.”

“ ‘Human’ is a pretty broad term,” he murmured, almost automatically. “The guards at Lucifer are human, I suppose.”

Her hand stole out to stroke his cheek. “Things aren’t perfect on Venus,” she said. “Nobody claims they are. But after the Big Rain—”

“Yeah. The carrot in front and the stick behind, and on the burro trots. He doesn’t stop to ask where the road is leading. I could show it by psychodynamic equations, but even an elementary reading of history is enough once a group gets power, it *never* gives it up freely.”

“There was Kemal Atatürk, back around 1920, wasn’t there?”

“Uh-huh. A very exceptional case: the hard-boiled, practical man who was still an idealist, and built his structure so well that his successors—who’d grown up under him—neither could nor wanted to continue dictatorship. It’s an example which the U.N. Inspectorate on Earth has studied closely and tried to adapt, so that its own power won’t some day be abused.

“The government of Venus just isn’t that sort. Their tactics prove it. Venus has to be collective till the Big Rain, I suppose, but that doesn’t give anyone the right to collectivize the minds of men. By the time this hellhole is fit for human life, the government will be unshakably in the saddle. Basic principle of psychobiology: survival with least effort. In human society, one of the easiest ways to survive and grow fat is to rule your follow men.

“It’s significant that you’ve learned about Atatürk. How much have they told you about the Soviet Union? The state was supposed to wither away there, too.”

“Would you actually…conspire to revolt?” she asked. He slammed the brakes so hard that his body jerked.

Danger! Danger! Danger! How did I get into this? What am I saying? Why is she asking me? With a single bound, he was out of bed and had snapped on the light.

Its glare hurt his eyes, and Barbara covered her face. He drew her hands away, gently but using his strength against her resistance. The face that looked up at him was queerly distorted; the lines were still there, but they had become something not quite human.

“Who put you up to this?” he demanded.

“No one…what are you talking about, what’s wrong?”

“The perfect spy,” he said bitterly. “A man’s own wife.”

“What do you mean?” She sat up, staring wildly through her tousled hair. “Have you gone crazy?”

“Could you be a spy?”

“I’m not,” she gasped. “I swear I’m not.”

“I didn’t ask if you were. What I want to know is could you be a spy?”

“I’m not. It’s impossible. I’m not—” She was screaming now, but the thick walls would muffle that.

“Karsov is going to send me to Lucifer,” he flung at her. “Isn’t he?”

“I’m not, I’m not, I’m not—”

He stabbed the questions at her, one after another, slapping when she got hysterical. The first two times she fainted, he brought her around again and continued; the third time, he called it off and stood looking down on her.

There was no fear or rage left in him, not even pity. He felt strangely empty. There seemed to be a hollowness inside his skull, the hollow man went through the motions of life and his brain still clicked rustily, but there was nothing inside, he was a machine.

The perfect spy, he thought. *Except that Karsov didn’t realize Un-men have advanced psych training. I know such a state as hers when I see it.*

The work had been cleverly done, using the same drugs and machines and conditioning techniques which had given him his own personality mask. (No—not quite the same. The Venusians didn’t know that a mind could be so deeply verbal-conditioned as to get by a narcoquiz; that was a guarded secret of the Inspectorate. But the principles were there.) Barbara did not remember being taken to the laboratories and given the treatment. She did not know she had been conditioned; consciously, she believed everything she had said, and it had been anguish when the man she loved turned on her.

But the command had been planted, to draw his real thoughts out of him. Almost, she had succeeded. And when she went back, a quiz would get her observations out of her in detail.

It would have worked, too, on an ordinary conspirator. Even if he had come to suspect the truth, an untrained man wouldn't have known just how to throw her conscious and subconscious minds into conflict, wouldn't have recognized her symptomatic reactions for what they were.

This tears it, thought Hollister. *This rips it wide open.* He didn't have the specialized equipment to mask Barbara's mind and send her back with a lie that could get past the Guardian psychotechnies. Already she knew enough to give strong confirmation to Karsov's suspicions. After he had her account, Hollister would be arrested and they'd try to wring his secrets out of him. That might or might not be possible, but there wouldn't be anything left of Hollister.

Not sending her back at all? No, it would be every bit as much of a giveaway, and sacrifice her own life to boot. Not that she might not go to Lucifer anyhow.

Well—

The first thing was to remove her conditioning. He could do that in a couple of days by simple hypnotherapy. The medicine chest held some drugs which would be useful. After that—

First things first. Diego can take charge for me while I'm doing it. Let the men think what they want. They're going to have plenty to think about soon.

He became aware of his surroundings again and of the slim form beneath his eyes. She had curled up in a fetal position, trying to escape. Emotions came back to him, and the first was an enormous compassion for her. He would have wept, but there wasn't time.

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Barbara sat up in bed, leaning against his breast. "Yes," she said tonelessly. "I remember it all now."

"There was a child coming, wasn't there?"

"Of course. They...removed it." Her hand sought his. "You might have suspected something otherwise. I'm all right, though. We can have another one sometime, if we live that long."

"And did Karsov tell you what he thought about me?"

"He mentioned suspecting you were an Un-man, but not being sure. The Technic Board wouldn't let him have you unless he had good evidence. That—No, I don't remember any more. It's fuzzy in my mind, everything which happened in that room."

Hollister wondered how he had betrayed himself. Probably he hadn't; his grumblings had fitted in with his assumed personality, and there had been no overt acts. But still, it was Karsov's job to suspect everybody, and the death of Valdez must have decided him on drastic action.

"Do you feel all right, sweetheart?" asked Hollister.

She nodded, and turned around to give him a tiny smile. "Yes. Fine. A little weak, maybe, but otherwise fine. Only I'm scared."

"You have a right to be," he said bleakly. "We're in a devil of a fix."

"You *are* an Un-man, aren't you?"

"Yes. I was sent to study the Venusian situation. My chiefs were worried about it. Seems they were justified, too. I've never seen a nastier mess."

"I suppose you're right," she sighed. "Only what else could we do? Do you want to bring Venus back under Earth?"

"That's a lot of comet gas, and you'd know it if the nationalist gang hadn't been censoring the books and spewing their lies out since before you were born. This whole independence movement was obviously their work from the beginning, and I must say they've done a competent job; good psychotechnies among them. It's their way to power. Not that all of them are so cynical about it—a lot must have rationalizations of one sort of another—but that's what it amounts to.

"There's no such thing as Venus being 'under' Earth. If ready for independence—and I agree she is—she'd be made a state in her own right with full U.N. membership. It's written into the charter that she could make her own internal policy. The only restrictions on a nation concern a few matters of trade, giving up military forces and the right to make war, guaranteeing certain basic liberties, submitting to inspection, and paying her share of U.N. expenses—which are smaller than the cost of even the smallest army. That's all. Your nationalists have distorted the truth as their breed always does."

She rubbed her forehead in a puzzled way. He could sympathize: a lifetime of propaganda wasn't thrown off overnight. But as long as she was with his cause, the rest would come of itself.

"There's no excuse whatsoever for this tyranny you live under," he continued. "It's got to go."

"What would you have us do?" she asked. "This isn't Earth. We do things efficiently here, or we die."

"True. But even men under the worst conditions can afford the slight inefficiency of freedom. It's not my business to write a constitution for Venus, but you might look at how Mars operates. They also have to have requirements of professional competence for public schools—deadwood gets flunked out fast enough—and the graduates have to stand for election if they want policy-making posts. Periodic elections do not necessarily pick better men than an appointive system, but they keep power from concentrating in the leaders. The Martians also have to ration a lot of things, and forbid certain actions that would endanger a whole city, but they're free to choose their own residences, and families, and ways of thinking, and jobs. They're also trying to reclaim the whole planet, but they don't assign men to that work, they hire them for it."

"Why doesn't everyone just stay at home and do nothing?" she asked innocently.

"No work, no pay; no pay, nothing to eat. It's as simple as that. And when jobs are open in the field, and all the jobs in town are filled, men will take work in the field—as free men, free to quit if they wish. Not many do, because the bosses aren't little commissars.

"Don't you see, it's the *mass* that society has to regulate; a government has to set things up so that the statistics come out right. There's no reason to regulate individuals."

"What's the difference?" she inquired.

"A hell of a difference. Some day you'll see it. Meanwhile, though, something has to be done about the government of Venus—not only on principle, but because it's going to be a menace to Earth before long. Once Venus is strong, a peaceful, nearly unarmed Earth is going to be just too tempting for your dictators. The World Wars had this much value, they hammered it into our heads and left permanent memorials of destruction to keep reminding us that the time to cut out a cancer is when it first appears. Wars start for a variety of reasons, but unlimited national sovereignty is always the necessary and sufficient condition. I wish our agents had been on the ball with respect to Venus ten years ago; a lot of good men are going to die because they weren't."

"You might not have come here then," she said shyly.

"Thanks, darling." He kissed her. His mind whirred on, scuttling through a maze that seemed to lead only to his silent, pointless death.

"If I could just get a report back to Earth! That would settle the matter. We'd have spaceships landing U.N. troops within two years. An expensive operation, of doubtful legality perhaps, a tough campaign so far from home, especially since we wouldn't want to destroy any cities—but there'd be no doubt of the outcome, and it would surely be carried through; because it would be a matter of survival for us. Of course, the rebellious cities would be helpful, a deal could be made there—and so simple a thing as seizing the food-producing towns would soon force a surrender. You see, it's not only the warning I've got to get home, it's the utterly priceless military intelligence I've got in my head. If I fail, the Guardians will be on the alert, they may very well succeed in spotting and duping every agent sent after me and flinging up something for Earth's consumption. Venus is a long ways off—"

He felt her body tighten in his arms. "So you do want to take over Venus."

"Forget that hogwash, will you? What'd we want with this forsaken desert? Nothing but a trustworthy government for it. Anyway—" His exasperation became a flat hardness: “If you and I are to stay alive much longer, it has to be done.”

She said nothing to that.

His mind clicked off astronomical data and the slide rule whizzed through his fingers. “The freighters come regularly on Hohmann ‘A’ orbits,” he said. “That means the next one is due in eight Venus days. They’ve only got four-man crews, they come loaded with stuff and go back with uranium and thorium ingots which don’t take up much room. In short, they could carry quite a few passengers in an emergency, if those had extra food supplies.”

“And the ferries land at New America,” she pointed out.

“Exactly. My dear, I think our only chance is to take over the whole city!”

It was hot in the barracks room, and rank with sweat. Hollister thought he could almost smell the fear, as if he were a dog. He stood on a table at one end, Barbara next to him, and looked over his assembled crew. Small, thin, swarthy, unarmed and drably clad, eyes wide with frightened waiting, they didn’t look like much of an army. But they were all he had.

“Señores,” he began at last, speaking very quietly, “I have called you all together to warn you of peril to your lives. I think, if you stand with me, we can escape, but it will take courage and energy. You have shown me you possess these qualities, and I hope you will use them now.”

He paused, then went on: “I know many of you have been angry with me because I have had my wife here. You thought me another of these bootlickers to a rotten government”—that brought them to full awareness!—“who was being rewarded for some Judas act. It is not true. We all owe our lives to this gallant woman. It was I who was suspected of being hostile to the rulers, and she was sent to spy on me for them. Instead, she told me the truth, and now I am telling it to you.

"You must know that I am an agent from Earth. No, no, I am not an Imperialist. As a matter of fact, the Central American countries were worried about their joint colony, Ciudad Alcazar, your city. It was suspected she had not freely joined this confederation. There are other countries, too, which are worried. I came to investigate for them; what I have seen convinces me they were right."

He went on, quickly, and not very truthfully. He had to deal with their anti-U.N. conditioning, appeal to the nationalism he despised. (At that, it wouldn't make any practical difference if some countries on Earth retained nominal ownership of certain tracts on Venus; a democratic confederation would reabsorb those within a generation, quite peacefully.) He had to convince them that the whole gang was scheduled to go to Lucifer; all were suspected, and the death of Valdez confirmed the suspicion, and there was always a labor shortage in the mines. His psych training stood him in good stead; before long he had them rising and shouting. *I shoulda been a politician,* he thought sardonically.

"...And are we going to take this outrage? Are we going to rot alive in that hell, and let our wives and children suffer forever? Or shall we strike back, to save our own lives and liberate Venus?"

When the uproar had subsided a little, he sketched his plan: a march on Lucifer itself, to seize weapons and gain some recruits, then an attack on New America. If it was timed right, they could grab the city just before the ferries landed, and hold it while all of them were embarked on the freighter—then off to Earth, and in a year or two a triumphant return with the army of liberation!

"If anyone does not wish to come with us, let him stay here. I shall compel no man. I can only use those who will be brave, and will obey orders like soldiers, and will set lives which are already forfeit at hazard for the freedom of their homes. Are you with me? Let those who will follow me stand up and shout 'Yes!' "

Not a man stayed in his seat; the timid ones, if any, dared not do so while their comrades were rising and whooping about the table. The din roared and rolled, bunk frames rattled, eyes gleamed murder from a whirlpool of faces. The first stage of Hollister's gamble had paid off well indeed, he thought; now for the rough part.

He appointed Fernandez his second in command and organized the men into a rough corps; engineering discipline was valuable here. It was late before he and Barbara and Fernandez could get away to discuss concrete plans. "We will leave two men here," said Hollister. "They will send the usual radio reports, which I shall write in advance for them, so no one will suspect; they will also take care of the rocket when it comes for Barbara, and I *hope* the police will assume it crashed.

We will send for them when we hold New America. I think we can take Lucifer by surprise, but we can't count on the second place not being warned by the time we get there."

Fernandez looked steadily at him. "And will all of us leave with the spaceship?" he asked.

"Of course. It would be death to stay. And Earth will need their knowledge of Venus."

"Simon, you know the ship cannot carry fifty men—or a hundred, if we pick up some others at Lucifer."

Hollister's face was wintry. "I do not think fifty will survive," he said.

Fernandez crossed himself, then nodded gravely. “I see. Well, about the supply problem—”

When he had gone, Barbara faced her husband and he saw a vague fright in her eyes. “You weren’t very truthful out there, were you?” she asked. “I don’t know much Spanish, but I got the drift, and—”

“All right!” he snapped wearily. “There wasn’t time to use sweet reasonableness. I had to whip them up fast.”

“They aren’t scheduled for Lucifer at all. They have no personal reason to fight.”

“They’re committed now,” he said in a harsh tone. “It’s fifty or a hundred lives today against maybe a hundred million in the future. That’s an attitude which was drilled into me at the Academy, and I’ll never get rid of it. If you want to live with me, you’ll have to accept that.”

“I’ll try,” she said.

The towers bulked black through a whirl of dust, under a sky the color of clotted blood. Hollister steered his tank close, speaking into its radio: “Hello, Lucifer. Hello, Lucifer. Come in.”

“Lucifer,” said a voice in his earphones. “Who are you and what do you want?”

“Emergency. We need help. Get me your captain.”

Hollister ground between two high gun towers. They had been built and manned against the remote possibility that a convict outbreak might succeed in grabbing some tanks; he was hoping their personnel had grown lazy with uneventful years. Edging around the main shell of the prison, he lumbered toward the landing field and the nearby radio mast. One by one, the twenty tanks of his command rolled into the compound and scattered themselves about it.

Barbara sat next to him, muffled in airsuit and closed helmet. Her gauntleted hand squeezed his shoulder, he could just barely feel the pressure. Glancing around to her stiffened face, he essayed a smile.

“Hello, there! Captain Thomas speaking. What are you doing?”

“This is Hollister, from the Last Chance air camp. Remember me? We’re in trouble and need help. Landslip damn near wiped our place out.” The Earthman drove his machine onto the field.

“Well, what are you horsing around like that for? Assemble your tanks in front of the main lock.”

“All right, all right, gimme a chance to give some orders. The boys don’t seem to know where to roost.”

Now! Hollister slapped down the drive switch and his tank surged forward. “Hang on!” he yelled. “Thomas, this thing has gone out of control—Help!”

It might have gained him the extra minute he needed. He wasn’t sure what was happening behind him. The tank smashed into the radio mast and he was hurled forward against his safety webbing. His hands flew—extend the grapple, snatch that buckling strut, drag it aside, and *push!*

The frame wobbled crazily. The tank stalled. Hollister yanked off his harness, picked up the cutting torch, whose fuel containers were already on his back, and went through the air lock without stopping to conserve atmosphere. Blue flame stabbed before him, he slid down the darkened extra faceplate and concentrated on his job. Get this beast down before it sent a call for help!

Barbara got the bull-like machine going again and urged it ahead, straining at the weakened skeleton. The mast had been built for flexibility in the high winds, not for impact strength. Hollister's torch roared, slicing a main support. A piece of steel clanged within a meter of him.

He dropped the torch and dove under the tank, just as the whole structure caved in.

"Barbara!" He picked himself out of the wreckage, looking wildly into the hurricane that blew around him. "Barbara, are you all right?"

She crawled from the battered tank and into his arms. "Our car won't go any more," she said shakily. The engine hood was split open by a falling beam and oil hissed from the cracked block.

"No matter. Let's see how the boys are doing—"

He led a run across the field, staggering in the wind. A chunk of concrete whizzed by his head and he dropped as one of the guard towers went by. Good boys! They'd gone out and dynamited it!

Ignoring the ramp leading down to the garage, Fernandez had brought his tank up to the shell's main air lock for humans. It was sturdily built, but his snorting monster walked through it. Breathable air gasped out. It sleeted a little as formaldehyde took up water vapor and became solid.

No time to check on the rest of the battle outside, you could only hope the men assigned to that task were doing their job properly. Hollister saw one of his tanks go up under a direct hit. All the towers weren't disabled yet. But he had to get into the shell.

"Stay here, Barbara!" he ordered. Men were swarming from their vehicles. He led the way inside. A group of uniformed corpses waited for him, drying and shriveling even as he watched. He snatched the carbines from them and handed them out to the nearest of his followers. The rest would have to make do with their tools till more weapons could be recovered.

Automatic bulkheads had sealed off the rest of the shell. Hollister blasted through the first one. A hail of bullets from the smoking hole told him that the guards within had had time to put on their suits.

He waved an arm. “Bring up Maria Larga!”

It took a while, and he fumed and fretted. Six partisans trundled the weapon forth. It was a standard man-drawn cart for semiportable field equipment, and Long Mary squatted on it: a motor-driven blower connected with six meters of hose, an air blast. This one had had an oxygen bottle and a good-sized fuel tank hastily attached to make a super flame thrower. Fernandez got behind the steel plate which had been welded in front as armor, and guided it into the hole. The man behind whooped savagely and turned a handle. Fire blew forth, and the compartment was flushed out.

There were other quarters around the cell block, which came next, but Hollister ignored them for the time being. The air lock in this bulkhead had to be opened the regular way, only two men could go through at a time, and there might be guards on the other side. He squeezed in with San Rafael and waited until the pump cleaned out the chamber. Then he opened the inner door a crack, tossed a homemade shrapnel grenade, and came through firing.

He stumbled over two dead men beyond. San Rafael choked and fell as a gun spat farther down the corridor. Hollister’s .45 bucked in his hand. Picking himself up, he looked warily down the cruelly bright length of the block. No one else. The convicts were yammering like wild animals.

He went back, telling off a few men to cut the prisoners out of their cells, issue airsuits from the lockers, arid explain the situation. Then he returned to the job of cleaning out the rest of the place.

It was a dirty and bloody business. He lost ten men in all. There were no wounded: if a missile tore open a suit, that was the end of the one inside. A small hole would have given time to slap on an emergency patch, but the guards were using magnum slugs.

Fernandez sought him out to report that an attempt to get away by rocket had been stopped, but that an indeterminate number of holdouts were in the refinery, which was a separate building. Hollister walked across the field, dust whirling about smashed machines, and stood before the smaller shell.

Thomas' voice crackled in his earphones: "You there! What is the meaning of this?"

That was too much. Hollister began to laugh. He laughed so long he thought perhaps he was going crazy.

Sobering, he replied in a chill tone: "We're taking over. You're trapped in there with nothing but small arms. We can blast you out if we must, but you'd do better to surrender."

Thomas, threateningly: "This place is full of radioactivity, you know. If you break in, you'll smash down the shielding—or we'll do it for you—and scatter the stuff everywhere. You won't live a week."

It might be a bluff—"All right," said Hollister with a cheerful note, "you're sealed in without food or water. We can wait. But I thought you'd rather save your own lives."

"You're insane! You'll be wiped out—"

"That's our affair. Any time you want out, pick up the phone and call the office. You'll be locked in the cells with supplies enough for a while when we leave." Hollister turned and walked away.

He spent the next few hours reorganizing; he had to whip the convicts into line, though when their first exuberance had faded they were for the most part ready to join him. Suddenly his army had swelled to more than two hundred. The barracks were patched up and made habitable, munitions were found and passed about, the transport and supply inventoried. Then word came that Thomas' handful were ready to surrender. Hollister marched them into the cell block and assigned some convicts to stand watch.

He had had every intention of abiding by his agreement, but when he was later wakened from sleep with the news that his guards had literally torn the prisoners apart, he didn't have the heart to give them more than a dressing down.

"Now," he said to his council of war, "we'd better get rolling again. Apparently we were lucky enough so that no word of this has leaked out, but it's a long way yet to New America."

"We have not transportation for more than a hundred," said Fernandez.

"I know. We'll take the best of the convicts; the rest will just have to stay behind. They *may* be able to pull the same trick on the next supply train that our boys in Last Chance have ready for the rocket—or they may not. In any event, I don't really hope they can last out, or that we'll be able to take the next objective unawares—but don't tell anyone that."

"I suppose not," said Fernandez somberly, "but it is a dirty business."

"War is always a dirty business," said Hollister.

He lost a whole day organizing his new force. Few if any of the men knew how to shoot, but the guns were mostly recoilless and automatic so he hoped some damage could be done; doctrine was to revert to construction equipment, which they did know how to use, in any emergency. His forty Latins were a cadre of sorts, distributed among the sixty convicts in a relationship equivalent to that between sergeant and private. The whole unit was enough to make any military man break out in a cold sweat, but it was all he had.

Supply wagons were reloaded and machine guns mounted on a few of the tanks. He had four Venusian days to get to New America and take over—and if the rebels arrived too soon, police reinforcements would pry them out again, and if the radio-control systems were ruined in the fighting, the ferries couldn't land.

It was not exactly a pleasant situation.

The first rocket was sighted on the fifth day of the campaign. It ripped over, crossing from horizon to horizon in a couple of minutes, but there was little doubt that it had spotted them. Hollister led his caravan off the plain, into broken country which offered more cover but would slow them considerably. Well, they'd just have to keep going day and night.

The next day it was an armored, atomic-powered monster which lumbered overhead, supplied with enough energy to go slowly and even to hover for a while. In an atmosphere without oxygen and always riven by storms, the aircraft of Earth weren't possible—no helicopters, no leisurely airboats; but a few things like this one had been built as emergency substitutes. Hollister tuned in his radio, sure it was calling to them.

"Identify yourselves! This is the Guardian Corps." Hollister adapted his earlier lie, not expecting belief—but every minute he stalled, his tank lurched forward another hundred meters or so.

The voice was sarcastic: “And of course, you had nothing to do with the attack on Lucifer?”

“What attack?”

“That will do! Go out on the plain and set up camp till we can check on you.”

“Of course,” said Hollister meekly. “Signing off.” From now on, it was strict radio silence in his army. He’d gained a good hour, though, since the watchers wouldn’t be sure till then that he was disobeying—and a lovely dust storm was blowing up.

Following plan, the tanks scattered in pairs, each couple for itself till they converged on New America at the agreed time. Some would break down, some would be destroyed en route, some would come late—a few might even arrive disastrously early—but there was no choice. Hollister was reasonably sure none would desert him; they were all committed past that point.

He looked at Barbara. Her face was tired and drawn, the red hair hung lusterless and tangled to her shoulders, dust and sweat streaked her face, but he thought she was very beautiful. “I’m sorry to have dragged you into this,” he said.

“It’s all right, dear. Of course I’m scared, but I’m still glad.”

He kissed her for a long while and then slapped his helmet down with a savage gesture.

The first bombs fell toward sunset. Hollister saw them as flashes through the dust, and felt their concussion rumble in the frame of his tank. He steered into a narrow, overhung gulch, his companion vehicle nosing close behind. There were two convicts in it—Johnson and Waskowicz—pretty good men, he thought, considering all they had been through.

Dust and sand were his friends, hiding him even from the infrared ’scopes above which made nothing of mere darkness. The rough country would help a lot, too. It was simply a matter of driving day and night, sticking close to bluffs and gullies, hiding under attack and then driving some more. He was going to lose a number of his units, but thought the harassing would remain aerial till they got close to New America. The Guardians wouldn’t risk their heavy stuff unnecessarily at any great distance from home.

The tank growled around a high pinnacle and faced him without warning. It was a military vehicle, and cannons swiveled to cover his approach.

Hollister gunned his machine and drove directly up the pitted road at the enemy. A shell burst alongside him, steel splinters rang on armor. Coldly, he noted for possible future reference the relatively primitive type of Venusian war equipment: no tracker shells, no Rovers. He had already planned out what to do in an encounter like this, and told his men the idea—now it had happened to him.

The Guardian tank backed, snarling. It was not as fast or as maneuverable as his, it was meant for work close to cities where ground had been cleared. A blast of high-caliber machine-gun bullets ripped through the cab, just over his head. Then he struck. The shock jammed him forward even as his grapple closed jaws on the enemy’s nearest tread.

“Out!” he yelled. Barbara snatched open the air lock and fell to the stones below. Hollister was after her. He flung a glance behind. His other tank was an exploded ruin, canted to one side, but a single figure was crawling from it, rising, zigzagging toward him. There was a sheaf of dynamite sticks in one hand. The man flopped as the machine gun sought him and wormed the last few meters. Waskowicz. “They got Sam,” he reported, huddling against the steel giant with his companions. “Shall we blast her?”

Hollister reflected briefly. The adversary was immobilized by the transport vehicle that clutched it bulldog fashion. He himself was perfectly safe this instant, just beneath the guns. “I’ve got a better notion. Gimme a boost.”

He crawled up on top, to the turret lock. “O.K., hand me that torch. I’m going to cut my way in!”

The flame roared, biting into metal. Hollister saw the lock’s outer door move. So—just as he had expected—the lads inside wanted out! He paused. A suited arm emerged with a grenade. Hollister’s torch slashed down. Barbara made a grab for the tumbling missile and failed. Waskowicz tackled her, landing on top. The thing went off.

Was she still alive—? Hollister crouched so that the antenna of his suit radio pocked into the lock. “Come out if you want to live. Otherwise I’ll burn you out.” Sullenly, the remaining three men appeared, hands in the air. Hollister watched them slide to the ground, covering them with his pistol. His heart leaped within him when he saw Barbara standing erect. Waskowicz was putting an adhesive patch on his suit where a splinter had ripped it.

“You O.K.?” asked Hollister.

“Yeah,” grunted the convict. “Pure dumb luck. Now what?”

“Now we got us one of their own tanks. Somebody get inside and find some wire or something to tie up the Terrible Three here. And toss out the fourth.”

“That’s murder!” cried one of the police. “We’ve only got enough oxy for four hours in these suits—”

“Then you’ll have to hope the battle is over by then,” said Hollister unsympathetically. He went over and disentangled the two machines.

The controls of the captured tank were enough like those of the ordinary sort for Barbara to handle. Hollister gave Waskowicz a short lecture on the care and feeding of machine guns, and sat up by the 40 mm. cannon himself; perforce, they ignored the 20. They closed the lock but didn’t bother to replenish the air inside; however, as Hollister drove up the mountainside, Waskowicz recharged their oxygen bottles from the stores inside the vehicle.

The battle was already popping when they nosed up onto the ledge and saw the great sweep of the city. Drifting dust limited his vision, but Hollister saw his own machines and the enemy’s. Doctrine was to ram and grapple the military tank, get out and use dynamite or torches, and then worm toward the colony’s main air lock. It might have to be blown open, but bulkheads should protect the civilians within.

An engineer tank made a pass at Hollister’s. He turned aside, realizing that his new scheme had its own drawbacks. Another police machine came out of the dust; its guns spoke, the engineers went up in a flash and a bang, and then it had been hit from behind. Hollister set his teeth and went on. It was the first time he had seen anything like war; he had an almost holy sense of his mission to prevent this from striking Earth again.

The whole operation depended on his guess that there wouldn’t be many of the enemy. There were only a few Guardians in each town, who wouldn’t have had time or reserves enough to bring in a lot of reinforcements; and tanks couldn’t be flown in. But against their perhaps lesser number was the fact that they would fight with tenacity and skill. Disciplined as engineers and convicts were, they simply did not have the training—even the psychological part of it which turns frightened individuals into a single selfless unit. They would tend to make wild attacks and to panic when the going got rough—which it was already.

He went on past the combat, towards the main air lock. Dim shapes began to appear through scudding dust. Half a dozen mobile cannon were drawn up in a semicircle to defend the gate. That meant—all the enemy tanks, not more than another six or seven, out on the ledge fighting the attackers.

"All right," Hollister's voice vibrated in their earphones. "We'll shoot from here. Barbara, move her in a zigzag at 10 kph, keeping about this distance; let out a yell if you think you have to take other evasive action. Otherwise I might hit the city."

He jammed his faceplate into the rubberite viewscope and his hands and feet sought the gun controls. Crosshairs—range—*fire one!* The nearest cannon blew up.

Fire two! Fire three! His 40 reloaded itself. Second gun broken, third a clean miss—*Fire four! Gotcha!*

A rank of infantry appeared, their suits marked with the Guardian symbol. They must have been flown here. Waskowicz blazed at them and they broke, falling like rag dolls, reforming to crawl in. They were good soldiers. Now the other three enemy mobiles were swiveling about, shooting through the dust. "Get us out of here, Barbara!"

The racket became deafening as they backed into the concealing murk. Another enemy tank loomed before them. Hollister fed it two shells almost point blank. If he could divert the enemy artillery long enough for his men to storm the gate—

He saw a police tank locked with an attacker, broken and dead. Hollister doubted if there were any left in action now. He saw none of his own vehicles moving, though he passed by the remnants of several. And where were his men?

Shock threw him against his webbing. The echoes rolled and banged and shivered for a long time. His head swam. The motors still turned, but—

"I think they crippled us," said Barbara in a small voice.

"O.K. Let's get out of here." Hollister sighed; it had been a nice try, and had really paid off better than he'd had a right to expect. He scrambled to the lock, gave Barbara a hand, and they slid to the ground as the three fieldpieces rolled into view on their self-powered carts.

The stalled tank's cannon spoke, and one of the police guns suddenly slumped. "Waskowicz!" Barbara's voice was shrill in the earphones. "He stayed in there—"

"We can't save him. And if he can fight our tank long enough—Build a monument to him some day. Now come on!" Hollister led the way into curtaining gloom. The wind hooted and clawed at him.

As he neared the main lock, a spatter of rifle fire sent him to his belly. He couldn't make out who was there, but it had been a ragged volley—take a chance on their being police and nailing him—"Just us chickens, boss!" he shouted. Somewhere in a corner of his mind he realized that there was no reason for shouting over a radio system. His schooled self-control must be slipping a bit.

"Is that you, Simon?" Fernandez's voice chattered in his ears. "Come quickly now, we're at the lock but I think they will attack soon."

Hollister wiped the dust from his faceplate and tried to count how many there were. Latins and convicts, perhaps twenty—"Are there more?" he inquired. "Are you the last?"

"I do not know, Simon," said Fernandez. "I had gathered this many, we were barricaded behind two smashed cars, and when I saw their artillery pull away I led a rush here. Maybe there are some partisans left besides us, but I doubt it."

Hollister tackled the emergency control box which opened the gate from outside. It would be nice if he didn't have to blast—Yes, by Heaven! It hadn't been locked! He jammed the whole score into the chamber, closed the outer door and started the pumps.

"They can get in, too," said Fernandez dubiously.

"I know. Either here or by ten other entrances. But I have an idea. All of you stick by me."

The anteroom was empty. The town's civilians must be huddled in the inner compartments, and all the cops must be outside fighting. Hollister threw back his helmet, filling his lungs with air that seemed marvelously sweet, and led a quick but cautious trot down the long halls.

"The spaceship is supposed to have arrived by now," he said. "What we must do is take and hold the radio shack. Since the police don't know exactly what our plans are, they will hesitate to destroy it just to get at us. It will seem easier merely to starve us out."

"Or use sleepy gas," said Fernandez. "Our suits' oxygen supply isn't good for more than another couple of hours."

"Yes…I suppose that is what they'll do. That ship had better be up there!"

The chances were that she was. Hollister knew that several days of ferrying were involved, and had timed his attack for hours after she was scheduled to arrive. For all he knew, the ferries had already come down once or twice. He didn't know if he or anyone in his band would live to be taken out. He rather doubted it; the battle had gone worse than expected, he had not captured the city as he hoped—but the main thing was to get some kind of report back to Earth.

A startled pair of technies met the invaders as they entered. One of them began an indignant protest, but Fernandez waved a rifle to shut him up. Hollister glanced about the gleaming controls and meters. He could call the ship himself, but he didn't have the training to guide a boat down. Well —

He pulled off his gloves and sat himself at the panel. Keys clattered beneath his fingers. When were the cops coming? Any minute. "Hello, freighter. Hello, up there. Spaceship, this is New America calling. Come in."

Static buzzed and crackled in his earphones. "Come in, spaceship. This is New America. Come in, damn it!"

Lights flashed on the board, the computer clicked, guiding the beam upward. It tore past the ionosphere and straggled weakly into the nearest of the tiny, equally spaced robot relay stations which circled the planet. Obedient to the keying signal, the robot amplified the beam and shot it to the next station, which kicked it farther along. The relayer closest to the spaceship's present position in her orbit focused the beam on her. Or was the orbit empty?

"...Hello, New America." The voice wavered, faint and distorted. *"Evening Star* calling New America. What's going on down there? We asked for a ferry signal three hours ago."

"Emergency," snapped Hollister. "Get me the captain—fast! Meanwhile, record this."

"But—"

"Fast, I said! And record. This is crash priority, condition red." Hollister felt sweat trickling inside his suit.

"Recording. Sending for the captain now."

"Good!" Hollister leaned over the mike. "For Main Office, Earth, United Nations Inspectorate. Repeat: Main Office, U.N. Inspectorate. Urgent, confidential. This is Agent A-431-240. Repeat, Agent A-431-240. Code Watchbird. Code Watchbird. Reporting on Venusian situation as follows—" He began a swift sketch of conditions.

"I think I hear voices down the hall," whispered Barbara to Fernandez.

The Latin nodded. He had already dragged a couple of desks into the corridor to make a sort of barricade; now he motioned his men to take positions; a few outside, the rest standing by, crowded together in the room. Hollister saw what was going on and swung his gun to cover the two technies. They were scared, and looked pathetically young, but he had no time for mercy.

A voice in his earphones, bursting through static: "This is Captain Brackney. What d'you want?"

"U.N.I. business, Captain. I'm besieged in the GCA shack here with a few men. We're to be gotten out at all costs if it's humanly possible."

He could almost hear the man's mouth fall open. "God in space—is that the truth?"

Hollister praised the foresight of his office. "You have a sealed tape aboard among your official records. All spaceships, all first-class public conveyances, do. It’s changed by an Un-man every year or so. O.K., that’s an I D code, secret recognition signal. It proves my right to commandeer everything you’ve got.”

“I know that much. What’s on the tape?”

“This year it will be, ‘’Twas brillig and the slithy toves give me liberty or give me pigeons on the grass alas.’ Have your radioman check that at once.”

Pause. Then: “O.K. I’ll take your word for it till he does. What do you want?”

“Bring two ferries down, one about fifty kilometers behind the other. No arms on board, I suppose?...No. Well, have just the pilots aboard, because you may have to take twenty or so back. How long will this take you?...Two hours? That long?...Yes, I realize you have to let your ship get into the right orbital position and—All right, if you can’t do it in less time. Be prepared to embark anyone waiting out there and lift immediately. Meanwhile stand by for further instructions...Hell, yes, you can do it!”

Guns cracked outside. “OK. I’ll start recording again in a minute. Get moving, Captain!” Hollister turned back to the others.

“I have to tell Earth what I know, in case I don’t make it,” he said. “Also, somebody has to see that these technies get the boats down right. Diego, I’ll want a few men to defend this place. The rest of you retreat down the hall and pick up some extra oxy bottles for yourselves and all the concentrated food you can carry; because that ship won’t have rations enough for all of us. Barbara will show you where it is.”

“And how will you get out?” she cried when he had put it into English.

“I’ll come to that. You’ve got to go with them, dear, because you live here and know where they can get the supplies. Leave a couple of suits here for the technies, pick up others somewhere along the way. When you get outside, hide close to the dome. When the ferry lands, some of you make a rush to the shack here. It's right against the outer wall. I see you're still carrying some dynamite, Garcia. Blow a hole to let us through...Yes, it's risky, but what have we got to lose?"

She bent to kiss him. There wasn't time to do it properly. A tommy gun was chattering in the corridor.

Hollister stood up and directed his two prisoners to don the extra suits. "I've no grudge against you boys," he said, "and in fact, if you're scared of what the cops might do to you, you can come along to Earth—but if those boats don't land safely, I'll shoot you both down."

Fernandez, Barbara, and a dozen others slipped out past the covering fire at the barricade and disappeared. Hollister hoped they'd make it. They'd better! Otherwise, even if a few escaped, they might well starve to death on the trip home.

The food concentrate would be enough. It was manufactured by the ton at Little Moscow—tasteless, but pure nourishment and bulk, normally added to the rest of the diet on Venus. It wouldn't be very palatable, but it would keep men alive for a long time.

The technies were at the board, working hard. The six remaining rebels slipped back into the room; two others lay dead behind the chewed-up barricade. Hollister picked up an auxiliary communication mike and started rattling off everything about Venus he could think of.

A Guardian stuck his head around the door. Three guns barked, and the head was withdrawn. A little later, a white cloth on a rifle barrel was wavered past the edge.

Hollister laid down his mike. “I’ll talk,” he said. “I’ll come out, with my arms. You’ll have just one man in sight, unarmed.” To his men he gave an order to drag the dead into the shack while the truce lasted.

Karsov met him in the hall. He stood warily, but there was no fear on the smooth face. “What are you trying to do?” he asked in a calm voice.

“To stay out of your mines,” said Hollister. It would help if he could keep up the impression this was an ordinary revolt.

“You have called that ship up there, I suppose?”

“Yes. They’re sending down a ferry.”

“The ferry could have an accident. We would apologize profusely, explain that a shell went wild while we were fighting you gangsters, and even pay for the boat. I tell you this so that you can see there is no hope. You had better give up.”

“No hope if we do that either,” said Hollister. “I’d rather take my chances back on Earth; they can’t do worse there than treat my mind.”

“Are you still keeping up that farce?” inquired Karsov. But he wasn’t sure of himself, that was plain. He couldn’t understand how an Un-man could have gotten past his quiz. Hollister had no intention of enlightening him.

“What have you got to lose by letting us go?” asked the Earthman. “So we tell a horror story back home. People there already know you rule with a rough hand.”

“I am not going to release you,” said Karsov. “You are finished. That second party of yours will not last long, even if they make it outside as I suppose they intend—they will suffocate. I am going to call the spaceship captain on the emergency circuit and explain there is a fight going on and he had better recall his boat. That should settle the matter; if not, the boat will be shot down. As for your group, there will be sleep gas before long.”

"I'll blow my brains out before I let you take me," said Hollister sullenly.

"That might save a lot of trouble," said Karsov. He turned and walked away. Hollister was tempted to kill him, but decided to save that pleasure for a while. No use goading the police into a possible use of high explosives.

He went back to the shack and called the *Evening Star* again. "Hello, Captain Brackney? U.N.I. speaking. The bosses down here are going to radio you with a pack of lies. Pretend to believe them and say you'll recall your ferry. Remember, they think just one is coming down. Then—" He continued his orders.

"That's murder!" said the captain. "Pilot One won't have a chance—"

"Yes, he will. Call him now, use spacer code; I don't think any of these birds know it, if they should overhear you. Tell him to have his spacesuit on and be ready for a crash landing, followed by a dash to the second boat."

"It's still a long chance."

"What do you think I'm taking? These are U.N.I. orders, Captain. I'm boss till we get back to earth, if I live so long. All right, got everything? Then I'll continue recording."

After a while he caught the first whiff and said into the mike: "The gas is coming now. I'll have to close my helmet. Hollister signing off."

His men and the technies slapped down their cover. It would be peaceful here for a little time, with this sector sealed off while gas poured through its ventilators. Hollister tried to grin reassuringly, but it didn't come off.

"Last round," he said. "Half of us, the smallest ones, are going to go to sleep now. The rest will use their oxygen, and carry them outside when we go."

Someone protested. Hollister roared him down. “Not another word! This is the only chance for all of us. No man has oxygen for much more than an hour; we have at least an hour and a half to wait. How else can we do it?”

They submitted unwillingly, and struggled against the anaesthetic as long as they could. Hollister took one of the dead men’s bottles to replace the first of his that gave out. His band was now composed of three sleeping men and three conscious but exhausted.

He was hoping the cops wouldn’t assault them quickly. Probably not; they would be rallying outside, preparing to meet the ferry with a mobile cannon if it should decide to land after all. The rebels trapped in here would keep.

The minutes dragged by. A man at the point of death was supposed to review his whole life, but Hollister didn’t feel up to it. He was too tired. He sat watching the telescreen which showed the space field. Dust and wind and the skeleton cradles, emptiness, and a roiling gloom beyond.

One of the wakeful men, a convict, spoke into the helmet circuit: “So you are U.N.I. Has all this been just to get you back to Earth?”

“To get my report back,” said Hollister.

“There are many dead,” said one of the Latins, in English. “You have sacrificed us, played us like pawns, no? What of those two we left back at Last Chance?”

“I’m afraid they’re doomed,” said Hollister tonelessly, and the guilt which is always inherent in leadership was heavy on him.

“It was worth it,” said the convict. “If you can smash this rotten system, it was well worth it.” His eyes were haunted. They would always be haunted.

“Better not talk,” said Hollister. “Save your oxygen.”

One hour. The pips on the radarscopes were high and strong now. The spaceboats weren't bothering with atmospheric braking, they were spending fuel to come almost straight down.

One hour and ten minutes. Was Barbara still alive?

One hour and twenty minutes.

One hour and thirty minutes. Any instant—

"There, señor! There!"

Hollister jumped to his feet. Up in a corner of the screen, a white wash of fire—here she came!

The ferry jetted slowly groundward, throwing up a blast of dust as her fierce blasts tore at the field. Now and then she wobbled, caught by the high wind, but she had been built for just these conditions. Close, close—were they going to let her land after all? Yes, now she was entering the cradle, now the rockets were still.

A shellburst struck her hull amidships and burst it open. The police were cautious, they hadn't risked spilling her nuclear engine and its radioactivity on the field. She rocked in the cradle. Hollister hoped the crash-braced pilot had survived. And he hoped the second man was skillful and had been told exactly what to do.

That ferry lanced out of the clouds, descending fast. She wasn't very maneuverable, but the pilot rode her like a horseman, urging, pleading, whipping and spurring when he had to. She slewed around and fell into a shaky curve out of screen range.

If the gods were good, her blast had incinerated the murderers of the first boat.

She came back into sight, fighting for control. Hollister howled. “Guide her into a cradle!” He waved his gun at the seated technics. “Guide her safely in if you want to live!”

She was down.

Tiny figures were running toward her heedless of earth still smoking underfoot. Three of them veered and approached the radio shack. “O.K.!” rapped Hollister. “Back into the corridor!” He dragged one of the unconscious men himself; stooping, he sealed the fellow’s suit against the poison gases outside. There would be enough air within it to last a sleeper a few minutes.

Concussion smashed at him. He saw shards of glass and wire flying out the door and ricocheting nastily about his head. Then the yell of Venus’ wind came to him. He bent and picked up his man. “Let’s go!”

They scrambled through the broken wall and out onto the field. The wind was at their backs, helping them for once. One of the dynamiters moved up alongside Hollister. He saw Barbara’s face, dim behind the helmet.

When he reached the ferry, the others were loading the last boxes of food. A figure in space armor was clumping unsteadily toward them from the wrecked boat. Maybe their luck had turned. Sweeping the field with his eyes, Hollister saw only ruin. There were still surviving police, but they were inside the city and it would take minutes for them to get out again.

He counted the men with him and estimated the number of food boxes. Fifteen all told, including his two erstwhile captives—Barbara’s party must have met opposition—but *she* still lived, God be praised! There were supplies enough, it would be a hungry trip home but they’d make it.

Fernandez peered out of the air lock. “Ready,” he announced. “Come aboard. We have no seats, so we must rise at low acceleration, but the pilot says there is fuel to spare.”

Hollister helped Barbara up the ladder and into the boat. “I hope you’ll like Earth,” he said awkwardly.

“I know I will—with you there,” she told him.

Hollister looked through the closing air lock at the desolation which was Venus. Some day it would bloom, but—

“We’ll come back,” he said.

WARRIORS FROM NOWHERE

"Crime," said Captain Dominic Flandry of the Terran Empire's Naval Intelligence Corps, "is entirely a matter of degree. If you shoot your neighbor in order to steal his property, you are a murderer and a thief, and will be psycho-revised and enslaved. If, however, you gather a band of lusty fellows, knock off a couple of million people, and take their planet, you are a great conqueror, a world hero, and your name goes down in the history books. Sooner or later, this inconsistency seeps into the national consciousness and causes a desire for universal peace. That is known as decadence, especially among historical philosophers who never had to do any of the actual fighting. The Empire is currently in the early stages of decadence, which is the most agreeable time to inhabit: peace and pleasure, and the society not yet rotted so far that chaos sets in. One might say the Empire is a banana just starting to show brown spots."

He was not jailed for his remarks because he made them in private, sitting on the balcony of his lodge on Varrak's southern continent and enjoying his usual noontime breakfast. His flamboyantly pajamaed legs were cocked up on the rail. Sighting over his coffee cup and between his feet, he saw the mountainside drop steeply down to a green sun-flooded wilderness. The light played over a lean, straight-boned face and a long hard body which made him look anything but a petty noble of a sated imperium. But his business—maintaining the status quo of a realm threatened by internal decay and outside aggression—was a strenuous one.

His current mistress, Ella, offered him a cigarette and he inhaled it into lighting. She was a stunning blonde whom he had bought a few weeks previously in the planet's one city, Fort Lone. He gathered that she was of the old pioneer stock, semi-aristocrats who had fallen on evil times and been sold for debt. With such people he sympathized, but there was nothing he could do about the system; and she could have worse owners than himself.

He took another sip of coffee, wiped his mustache, and drew a breath to resume his musings. An apologetic cough brought his head around, and he saw his valet, the only other being in the lodge. This was a slim humanoid from Shalmu, with a hairless green skin, prehensile tail, and impeccable manners. Flandry had christened him Chives and taught him several things which made him valuable in more matters than laying out a dress suit. "Pardon me, sir, Admiral Fenross is calling from the city."

Flandry cursed and got up. "Fenross! What's he doing on this planet? Tell him to—no, never mind, it's anatomically impossible." He sauntered into the study, frowning. There was no love lost between him and his superior, but Fenross wouldn't call a man on furlough unless it was urgent.

The screen held a gaunt, sharp, red-haired face which dripped sweat past dark-shadowed eyes. "There you are! Put in your scrambler, combination 770." When Flandry had adjusted the dials, the admiral said harshly: "Furlough canceled. Get busy at once." With a sudden break in his voice: "Though God knows what you can do. But it means all our heads."

Flandry sucked in his cheeks with a long drag of smoke. “What is it—sir?”

“The sack of Fort Lone was more than a raid—”

“What sack?”

“You don’t *know?*”

“Haven’t tuned the telescreen for a week, sir. I wanted to rest.”

Fenross snarled something and said thickly, “Well, then, a barbarian horde streaked in yesterday, shot up all the defense posts, landed, and in three hours had put the place to the torch and looted all the available wealth. Also took about a thousand citizens, mostly women. They made a clean getaway before the nearest naval base was even alerted. No telling where they came from or where they went.”

Flandry cursed again, vividly. He knew the situation. The Taurian sector of the Empire was meant as a buffer; beyond it lay the wild stars, an unexplored jungle swarming with barbarian hordes who had gotten spaceships and atomic blasters too soon and used them only to plunder. There was always war on these marches, raids and punitive expeditions. But still—an attack on Varrak! He found it hard to believe.

“That’s not our department, sir, unless we’re wanted to track down just who did it,” he ventured. “The Navy does the fighting, I’m told. So why pick on me?”

“You and every other man in the sector. Listen, Flandry, the barbarians have made away with her Highness, the Lady Megan of Luna, princess of the blood and the Emperor’s favorite granddaughter!”

“Hmmm—so.” Not a muscle stirred in Flandry’s countenance, but he felt his belly grow tense and cold. “I…see. What clues have you got?”

"Not many. One officer did manage to hide in the ruins and take a solidographic film—just a few minutes' worth. It may give us a lead; perhaps the xenological division can identify the raiders from it. But still—" Fenross paused, it obviously hurt him to say so, but he got it out: "We need you."

"I should say you do, dear chief." Modesty was not a failing of Flandry's. "All right, I'll flit directly over. Cheers." He cut the circuit and went back onto the balcony. Chives was clearing away the breakfast dishes and Ella sat smoking. "So long, children. I'm on my way."

The girl watched him with eyes like blued silver. "What is it, Nick?" she asked quietly.

Flandry's mouth twisted. "I'm not sure yet, but I think I've just been condemned to death."

It was like a scene from hell.

Against a tumbled, blazing background of ruin, the barbarians were raging in an armored swarm: huge burly men in helmet and cuirass, some carrying archaic swords. The picture was focused on a dais where a dozen young women were huddled, stripped alike of clothing and hope, the wildness of terror fading before despair. Some of them were being carried off toward a disc-shaped spaceship, others were still in the middle of the horde. They were being sold. Great gems, silver and gold, the loot of the city, were being tossed at the gnomish unhuman figure which squatted on the dais and handed down each purchase to a grinning conqueror.

The film ended. Flandry looked past the shattered walls of the building where he sat, to the smoking desolation which had been Fort Lone. Imperial marines were on guard, a relief station had been set up, a heavy battlewagon hung in the sky—all of which was too late to do much good.

“Well,” snapped Fenross, “what d’you make of it?”

Flandry turned the enlarger knob, until one of the solid-seeming images stood gigantic before him. “Definitely human,” he said. “Except for that dwarf creature, I’d say they were all of Terrestrial race.”

“Of course! I know that much, you idiot. They must be from some early colony out here which got lost and reverted to barbarism. There have been such cases before. But which one? Is it even on record?”

“The spaceship is an odd design. I think there are some beings in the Merseian hegemony who still build that type, but it’s not what I would expect barbarians imitating our boats to have.”

Fenross gulped and his knuckles whitened on the table edge. “If the Merseians are behind this—”

Flandry gestured at the dwarf. “Tall, dark, and handsome there may offer a clue to their origin. I don’t know. I’ll have to consult the files. But I must say this raid has a strange pattern. Varrak is lightyears inside the border. There are plenty of tempting spots closer than this to the Wilderness. Then, the raiders knew exactly where to shoot and bomb to knock out all the defenses. And, of course, they got the princess. Looks very much as if they had inside help, doesn’t it?”

“I thought of that too. Every survivor of the garrison is being hypnoprobed, but so far none of them have known anything.”

“I doubt that any will. Our enemy is too smooth an operator to leave such clues. If he had collaborators in the fort, they left with the raiders and we’ll list them as ‘missing, presumed disintegrated in action.’ But what’s the story on her Highness?”

Fenross groaned. “She was taking a tour of the outer marches. Those meatheads back on Terra should have known better than that! Or maybe the Imperial whim overruled them. The Lady Megan has the Emperor around her little finger. Anyhow, she went incognito, with a secret-service detachment to guard her, of course. But the raiders just smashed down the walls of the place where she was staying, shot all her guards, and made off with her and her servants."

"Again," said Flandry, "it looks like inside information. Why else should they hit Varrak, except to get the princess? The looting was just a sideline. And apparently they knew precisely where she was housed." He took out a cigarette and inhaled nervously. "What d'you think their motive is? Ransom?"

"I hope to God it's just money. But I'm afraid—These barbarian kings aren't stupid. I'm afraid her ransom will be political and military concessions which we can ill afford. Especially if the raiders, as you suggest, are really Merseian agents. The Emperor will give it to them, regardless." Fenross laid his head on his clenched fists. "This could mean the beginning of the end for Terra."

"I suppose his Majesty has not yet been informed?"

"Of course not! I know him. His first act on learning the news will be to have everybody who could possibly be responsible executed. That includes you and me, in case you don't know. I think we can suppress the information for a couple of weeks, maybe a month, but certainly no longer. If we don't get her back before then—" Fenross drew a finger across his throat.

Flandry scowled. He was uncommonly fond of living. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Alerting all our agents. We'll comb the Wilderness. We'll fill the whole damned Merseian Empire with spies. But—I'm afraid we haven't time to do anything. Space is too big—" Fenross turned angry eyes on his subordinate. "Well, don't just sit there! Get going!"

"No sense duplicating effort, darling sir." Flandry calculated his insolence deftly. "I've got a notion of my own, if you'll give me a free hand to play with it. I'll want access to all the files, including the most confidential."

"Go ahead," mumbled Fenross. "Enjoy yourself while you can."

Flandry got up. "It might stimulate my mind if a small reward were offered," he said mildly.

The lodge was as good a place as any to begin his work. Telestats from the central files could be sent directly to him there, on scrambled circuit. A monitor in his receiver, responding to the Secret order, printed the material in code on tapes which would disintegrate within an hour. Flandry sat in dressing gown and slippers, wading through meter after meter of information; much of it had cost lives, some of it was worth an empire. It was the job of Intelligence to know everything about everyone in the attainable galaxy. Chives kept him supplied with coffee and cigarettes.

Ella stole up behind him near dawn and laid a hand on his head. "Aren't you ever coming to bed, Nick?" she asked.

"Not yet," he grunted. "I'm on the track of a hunch. And if my notion is right, we have to move fast; there'll be less than the two weeks beloved Fenross, may he rot in hell, is counting on. Our enemy will see that his august Majesty gets the news before then."

She nodded, the light sliding down her long gold hair, and sat down at his feet. Slowly the sun rose.

"Stars and planets and little pink asteroids," muttered Flandry at last. "I may have the answer. Electronic cross-filing is a wonderful invention."

She regarded him wordlessly. He rubbed his chin, feeling its unshaven bristles scratchy on his palm. “But what I’m going to do with the answer, I don’t know. Talk about sticking your head in a lion’s mouth—”

He paced the floor restlessly. “Chives is a handy fellow with a gun or a set of burglar’s tools,” he said, “but I need someone else.”

“Can I help, Nick?” asked Ella “I’d be glad to. You have been good to me.”

He regarded her a moment. Tall and lithe and fair, with something in her of the strength which had won this world from jungle— “Ella,” he inquired suddenly, “can you shoot?”

“I used to hunt ferazzes in the mountains,” she said.

“And—look—what would you say if I set you free? Not only that, but hunted up all the rest of your family and bought them free and set them up with some land of their own. The reward would cover that, with a bit to spare for my next poker game.”

Sudden tears were in her eyes. “I don’t have any words,” she said.

“But would you risk death, torture, degradation—whatever punishment a crazy all-powerful mind could think of, if we failed? You aren’t so badly off now. Will you set it all on a turn of the cards?”

“Of course,” she said quietly, and rose to her feet.

He laughed and slapped her in a not very brotherly fashion. “All right! You can come out on the target range and prove what you said about shooting while Chives packs.”

In Flandry’s private speedster it was a three-day flit to Vor. After rehearsing what must be done, he spent the time amusing himself and his companions. There might not be another chance.

Vor had been settled early in the days of Imperial expansion, and had become a rich world, the natural choice of capital for the duke who governed the Taurian Sector. It was like another Terra—less grandiose, more bustling and businesslike—and the Sector itself was almost an empire within the Empire, a powerful realm of many stars whose ruler sat high in the councils of the Imperium.

Flandry left Chives in the boat at the main spaceport, and gave the portmaster a sizeable bribe to forget that his vessel was more heavily armed than a civilian craft ought to be. He and Ella caught a flittercab downtown and got a penthouse in one of the better hotels. Flandry never stinted himself when he was on expense account, but this time the penthouse had a business reason. You could land a spaceboat on the roof if a quick getaway became necessary.

He called the ducal palace that evening and got through to the chief social secretary. "Captain Sir Dominic Flandry of his Majesty's Intelligence Corps," he said pompously to the effeminate face. "I would like an audience with his Grace. There is some business to discuss."

"I am afraid, sir, that—"

A telescreen buzzed by the secretary's elbow. "Excuse me." He spoke to it. When he faced back around, his expression was obsequious. "Of course, sir. His Grace would be pleased to see you at fourteen hundred tomorrow."

"Good," said Flandry. "I'll buy you a lollipop sometime, Junior." He switched off and laughed at Ella's astonished face. "That does it," he told her. "Someone was monitoring the secretary, and when he got my name, let the secretary know in no uncertain terms that my presence is urgently desired at the palace—or, at least, that an invitation would allay my suspicions for a while."

There were no lights on, but by the radiance of Vor's one great moon he saw her bite her lip. "That doesn't sound good," she said.

"It sounds very much as if my notion is right. Look here." Flandry had been over all the points a dozen times, but he liked to hear himself talk. "The Intelligence Corps is highly efficient If you point it in the right direction. In this case, the kidnapping was so designed that Fenross is pointed in a hundred different directions, none of them correct. He's tackling the hopeless job of investigating a million barbarian stars and the hostile Merseian Empire. But I, having a nasty suspicious mind, thought that there might be elements within our own territory which would not mind having the Emperor's favorite granddaughter for a guest.

"That alien-type spaceship was meant as a clue toward Merseia, but I didn't like it. Merseia is too far away from here for Wilderness barbarians to copy from them; and if the raid was their doing, why should they give themselves away so blatantly? Likewise, ordinary barbarian looters would not have come to Varrak in the first place, and wouldn't have had such accurate information in the second place. Even Merseia was unlikely to know about the princess' tour. Oh, they were genuine enough outlanders, you could see that on them—but who hired them, and who provided the leadership?

"That little gnome thing gave me a hunch. He was obviously in some position of authority, or he wouldn't have been demanding loot in exchange for those girls—the raiders would simply have taken the women themselves. The files held no information on a race of that exact description, but I did find out that his Grace, Duke Alfred of Tauria, has a number of aliens in his household, some of them from unknown regions where only a few human ships have ventured.

“Well, it seems logical. Before long, some barbarian king is going to demand a goodly chunk of this sector as Megan’s ransom. She may be returned then, with her memory wiped clean of the circumstances, or she may not. The important thing is that the king will get the territory. The Emperor will suppose we can fight a war to get it back. But the king will be a puppet of Alfred’s, and if it’ll be Alfred’s own army which bears the brunt of that campaign. The duke, pretending all the time to be on our side, will see to it that we’re beaten back and lose the rest of Tauria to boot. Then he can set himself up as an independent ruler, or he can make a deal with some rival empire like Merseia. In either case, we lose one of our main bulwarks.

“At least,” finished Flandry, “that’s how I’d work the business.”

Ella shivered, and there was something haunted in her eyes. “War,” she whispered. “Killing, burning, looting, enslaving—no!”

“It’s up to us to stop it,” said Flandry. “I can’t tell Fenross my suspicions yet; even if he believed me, which is doubtful, the Taurian division of the Corps is probably full of Alfred’s agents. He’d find out and take steps to halt us. We’d probably all find ourselves jailed for treason. Now by announcing myself here, I must have alarmed his Grace. He’ll want to know if I’m really on his trail—”

A shadow blocked out the moon and moved across the floor. Flandry peered cautiously through the window. Below the great skyscraper, the night city flared and blazed with a million jeweled lights, all the way up to the huge fortress-like castle on the hill. But there was a flitter landing on his roof.

“Quick work,” muttered Flandry between his teeth. His blaster slid from its holster. “I thought the duke would wait to see me, but apparently not.”

Ella cradled a repeater rifle in her arms. In the darkened room, a shaft of moonlight threw her face into white, unreal relief. “They may be innocent,” she said.

“They wouldn’t land here without asking if they were.” Flandry saw half a dozen dark forms get out and start toward the penthouse. Moonrays glittered on metal. “Local assassins, I daresay, hired to nab us. Let ‘em have it!”

His blaster roared, a thunderbolt leaped through the windowpane and wrapped one man in flame. The others yelled, scattering. Ella’s rifle spoke, and someone reeled on the edge of the roof and toppled horribly over the wall. Bullets cracked against the house.

“If this were ordinary innocent robbery, the police would be down on us like hawks,” observed Flandry. “But they’ve been warned off here for tonight.” His nostrils dilated. “Sleepy gas! Get your mask!”

The fight snarled for minutes. Two men came behind the house, blew open the door with a grenade, and sprang into the living room. Ella cut them down as Flandry fired out the window. Then there was silence.

“That’s all,” said Flandry. His voice came muffled through the mask. “Clumsy job. Friend Alfred must be rattled. Well, we’ll give him time to think up something really fiendish for us.” He stepped over to the service screen and punched its button. “I trust the manager has also been told to mind his own business tonight…Hello, service? I’m afraid there’s a bit of a mess in our place. Can you send someone up to clean it?”

*****

The audience hall was huge, and earlier dukes had furnished it with a luxury of gold and tapestry which was somewhat overwhelming. The present master hadn’t bothered to remove this, but his more austere personality showed in the comfortless furniture and the armed guards who formed an unmoving wall on either side. Flandry felt dwarfed, but he walked with his usual swagger up to the throne, where he delivered a sweeping bow. In colorful clothes and ceremonial sword, he outshone the man who sat there.

Duke Alfred was big, his muscles running toward middle-aged paunch but hardness still on the blocky gray-bearded face. Flandry had met him briefly, some years before, and marked him for a dangerous man. “Be at ease,” he said. His voice and the expressionless countenance did not echo the hospitable words. “Whom have you here?” He nodded at Ella, who crouched abjectly on the carpet.

“A small present for your Grace,” said Flandry. “She may amuse you.” There was nothing suspicious about that; one customarily brought gifts when visiting a noble, and both of them had been X-rayed for weapons as they entered.

“Hm.” Interest and appreciation flickered in the duke’s eyes. “Look at me, wench.” Ella raised a timid face. She was quite an actress, as Flandry had already learned. “Good. Take her to the harem.” A gigantic four-armed Gorzunian slave kowtowed and led her out.

“Well,” said Alfred, “what did you wish to see me about?”

“A trifling matter, your Grace, but it may be that you can furnish information my service needs.” Flandry spun a plausible tale of investigating some Merseian agents who were being sent to stir up discord in the outer provinces. Tactfully, he mentioned the fight last night and his belief that the enemy knew who was trailing them and had tried to wipe him out. Perhaps the duke had some news of their activities? So far they had not manifested themselves in Tauria but it was as well to make sure.

No, there was nothing. If any such news did come, the duke would certainly make it known to the Corps. Meanwhile, he was a busy man. Good day, Captain.

Flandry backed out. When he got to the castle gates, his spine crawled. Alfred was not going to let him get away so easily. There was bound to be another attempt to capture him and hypnoprobe him to find out if he really suspected anything. And this time the duke wasn't going to trust hired thugs.

Flandry went downtown to the local Corps office and filed a routine report on his ostensible mission. Alfred's men would be bound to check up on that much. More surreptitiously, he fetched a standard disguise kit and weapons from the locker where he had left them.

He ate a lonely supper in a restaurant, thinking rather wistfully of Ella, and dawdled over his liqueur. Two men who had entered shortly after him and taken a nearby table idled too, but rather awkwardly.

Flandry studied them without seeming to do so. One was a small, clever-looking chap, the other was big and rangy and had a military bearing. He must be one of the household guards, out of uniform for the occasion. He would do.

Flandry got up and strolled into the street. His shadows followed, mingling with the crowd. He could have shaken them easily enough, but that wasn't his intention. Give them every break instead; they were hard-working men and deserved a helping hand.

He caught a flittercab. "Know any dives?" he asked fatuously. "You know, music, girls, anything goes, but not too expensive."

“Sure, sir.” The cabbie grinned and flew toward the slums which fringed the town. They landed on the twenty-fifth flange of a tall building which blinked with garishly obscene lights. Another cab spiraled down behind them.

Flandry spent a while in the bar, amused at the embarrassment of his shadows, and then picked a girl, a slim thing with a red insolent mouth. She snuggled against him as they went down the corridor. A door opened for them and they went through.

“Sorry, sister.” Flandry pulled out his stunner and let her have a medium beam. She’d be out for hours. He laid her on the bed and stood waiting, the weapon in his hand.

It was not long before the door opened again. His followers were there. Had they bribed or threatened the madam? Flandry’s stunner dropped the smaller man.

The big one was on him like a tiger—a skilled twist, and the gun clanged free against the wall. Flandry drove a knee upward. Pain lanced through him as it jarred against body armor. The guardsman got a hold which should have pinned him. Flandry writhed free with a trick he knew, whirled about and delivered a rabbit punch that had all his weight behind it. The guardsman fell.

For a moment Flandry, panting, hesitated. It was safest to murder those two, but— He settled for giving his victims a hypo to keep them cold. Then he stepped out the window onto the emergency landing and signaled for a cab on his wristphone. When it arrived the driver looked into a blaster muzzle.

“We’ve got three sleepers to get rid of,” said Flandry cheerfully. “On your way, friend, unless you want to add a corpse to the museum. You tote them.”

They left town well behind and found a region of woods, where they landed. Flandry stunned and hypoed the driver, and laid all four out under a tree. As an afterthought he folded their hands on their breasts and put white flowers in their fingers.

Now to work! He stripped them and took out his kit. The ID machine got busy, recording every detail of the guardsman’s appearance. When he was finished, he threw his loot in the cab and took off. The sleepers would take till tomorrow to wake up, and then, without clothes or money, would need another day or more to reach an area where they could get help and report what had happened. By that time the affair would be over, one way or another.

As the autopilot flew him back, Flandry studied the guardsman’s papers. At the edge of town he abandoned the cab and took another to the spaceport. He was sure there would be ducal agents watching there. They saw him enter his boat, get clearance for interstellar space, and take off. Presumably his mission was finished, or else he was scared and hightailing it for safety. In either case the enemy would tend to write him off, which would help matters considerably.

What the agents did not see was Flandry and Chives hard at work disguising the Terran. Much can be done with plastic face masks, false fingertips and the rest. It wouldn’t pass a close examination, but Flandry was hoping there wouldn’t be one. When he got through, he was Lieutenant Roger Bargen of the ducal household guards. The boat landed near a village some fifty kilometers from town. Flandry caught the morning monorail back.

He did not report to his colonel when he entered the castle. That would have been asking for a hypnoprobe. But it was pretty clear that Bargen's job had been secret, none of his messmates would have known of it—so if they saw Bargen scurrying around the place, too busy for conversation, it would not occur to them that anything had gone wrong. Of course, the deception could only last a few hours, but Flandry was betting that he would only need that long.

In fact, he reflected grimly, *I'm betting my life.*

Ella the slave, who had been Ella McIntyre and a free woman of Varrak's hills, did not like the harem. There was something vile about its perfumed atmosphere, and she hoped the duke would not send for her that night. If he did—well, that was part of the price. But she was left alone. There was a dormitory for the lesser inmates, like a luxurious barracks, and a wide series of chambers for them to lounge in, and silent nonhuman slaves to bring them food. She prowled restlessly about as the day waned. The other women watched her but said little; such new arrivals must be fairly common.

But she had to make friends, fast. The harem was the most logical place for the duke to hide his prisoner, secrecy and seclusion were the natural order of things here. But it would be a gossipy little world. She picked an alert-looking girl with wide bright eyes, and wandered up to her and smiled shyly. "Hello," she said. "My name is Ella"

"Just come in, I suppose?"

"Yes. I'm a present. Ummm—all—how is it here?"

"Oh, not such a bad life. Not much to do. Gets a little boring." Ella shivered at the thought of a lifetime inside these walls, but nodded meekly.

The other girl wanted to know what was going on outside, and Ella spent some hours telling her.

The conversation finally drifted the way she hoped. Yes—something strange. The whole western suite had been sealed off, with household troopers on guard at the door to the hallway. Somebody new must be housed there, and speculation ran wild on the who and why.

Ella held her tension masked with a shivering effort. "Have you any idea who it might be?" she asked brightly.

"I don't know. Maybe some alien. His Grace has funny tastes. But you'll find that out, my dear."

Ella bit her lips.

That night she could not sleep at all. It was utterly dark, a thick velvety black full of incense, it seemed to strangle her. She wanted to scream and run, run between the stars till she was back in the loved lost hills of Varrak. A lifetime without seeing the sun or feeling the hill-wind on her face! She turned wearily, wondering why she had ever agreed to help Flandry.

But if he lived and came to her, she could tell him what he wanted to know. *If* he lived! And even if he did, they were in the middle of a fortress. He would be flayed alive, and she—*God, let me sleep. Just let me sleep and forget.*

The fluorotubes came on again with morning, a cold dawn. She bathed in the swimming pool and ate her breakfast without tasting. She wondered if she looked as tired and haggard as she felt.

A scaled hand touched her shoulder. She whirled about with a little shriek and looked into a beaked reptile face. It spoke hissingly: "You are the new concubine?"

She tried to answer but her throat tightened up.

“Come.” The guard turned and strode away. Numbly, she went after him. The chatter in the harem died as she went by, and the eyes that followed were frightened. A girl was not summoned by an armed guard for pleasure.

They went down a long series of chambers. At the end there was a door. It opened at the guard’s gesture, and he waved her in. As he followed, the door closed behind him.

The room was small and bare. It held a chair with straps and wires and a switchboard; she recognized the electronic torture machine which left no marks on the flesh. In another chair crouched a being who was not human. Its small hunched body was wrapped in gorgeous robes, and great lusterless eyes regarded her from the bulging hairless head.

“Sit down.” A thin hand waved her to the electronic chair, and she took it helplessly. “I want to talk to you. You will do well to answer without lies.” The voice was high and squeaky, but there was nothing ridiculous about the goblin who spoke. “For your information, I am Sarlish of Jagranath, which lies beyond the Empire; I am his Grace’s chief intelligence officer, so you see this is no routine matter. You were brought here by a man of whom I have suspicions. Why?”

“As—a gift—sir,” she whispered.

“Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes,” said Sarlish surprisingly. “I did not learn of it till this morning, or I would have investigated sooner. You are just a common slave?”

“Yes—sir—he bought me on Varrak before coming here—”

“Varrak, eh? I’d like to hypnoprobe you, but that would leave you in no fit state for his Grace tonight if you should be innocent. I think—” Sarlish stroked his meager chin contemplatively. “Yes. A bit of pain will disorganize your mind enough so that if you are lying, the proper questions will bring out inconsistencies. After that we can see about the probe. I am sorry. He gestured to the guard.

Ella leaped up, yelling. The guard snatched for her and she ducked free, driving a kick at his belly. He grunted and stepped back. She threw herself at the door. As it opened, the reptile hands closed on her arm. Whirling, she brought the extended fingers of her free hand into his eyes. He screamed and backed away.

“Ah, so,” murmured Sarlish. He took out a stunner and aimed it judicially at the struggling pair.

“I wouldn’t try that, Dollie,” said a voice in the doorway.

Sarlish spun about to face a blaster. “Bargen!” he cried, dropping his weapon. Then, slowly: “No, Captain Flandry, isn’t it?”

“In person, and right in the traditional nick of time.” The blinded guard lurched toward him. Flandry shot him with a narrow beam. Sarlish sprang from his chair at fantastic speed and scuttled between his legs, bringing him down. Ella leaped over the Terran and caught the gnome with a flying tackle. Sarlish hissed and clawed. She twisted at his neck in sheer self-defense, and suddenly the thin spine snapped and Sarlish kicked once and was still.

“Nice going!” Flandry scrambled to his feet. With a quick motion, he peeled off the face mask. “Too hot in this damned thing. All right, did you find our princess?”

“This way.” A swift cold gladness was in the girl. She bent and picked up the dead guard’s blaster. “I’ll show you. But can we—?”

“Not by ourselves. But I’ve signaled Chives. Got at a radio just before coming here. Though how he’s going to find exactly where we are, I don’t know. I’ve had to assume you’d succeeded—” Flandry zigzagged to avoid a flock of screaming girls. “Wow! No wonder the duke has nonhuman servants here!”

“Behind that wall—we’ll have to go around, through the hall,” panted Ella.

“And be shot as we come? No, thanks!” Flandry began assembling scattered chairs and divans into a rough barricade before the wall. “Cut our way through, will you?”

Plastic bubbled and smoked as Ella’s flame attacked it. Flandry went on: “I bluffed my way in here by saying I had to fetch someone. A girl told me where you’d been taken. Imagine the only reason I got away with it is that no man would dare come in here unless he had orders from Alfred himself. But now there’s the devil to pay, and I only hope Chives can locate us in time and not get himself blown out of the sky.” He looked along the barrel of his blaster, down the arched length of the room to the rest of the suite. “Here they come!”

A troop of guards burst into sight. Flandry set his blaster to needle beam—that gave maximum range, but you had to be skillful to hit anything at such a distance. One of the men toppled. A curtain of fire raged before the others. The heat of it scorched his face. He picked off another man, and another. But the rest were circling around, getting within wide-beam range, and one shot could fry him. “Get that wall cut!”

“Here goes!” Ella jumped back as the circle she had burned collapsed outward. A drop of molten plastic stung her skin. The barricade burst into flame as a beam caught it. She tumbled through the hole, heedless of its hot edges, and Flandry followed her.

The girl inside crouched against the wall, mouth open with terror. She was dark, with a pretty, vacuous face that showed the Imperial blood.

“Lady Megan?” snapped Flandry.

“Yes,” she whimpered. “Who are you?”

“At your service, your highness—I hope.” Flandry sent a wide beam out through the hole in the wall. A man screamed his agony. The agent reflected bitterly how many brave folk—probably including Ella and himself—were dead because a spoiled brat had wanted a new kind of thrill.

The door swung inward. Ella blasted as it did, and there was a roar of disintegrating flesh and bone and armor. Flandry heaved a sofa up against the sagging door. Poor protection—they could only hold out for minutes.

He turned a sweating, smoke-blackened face to the princess. “I take it you know the duke kidnapped you, your Highness?” he asked.

“Yes,” she whined. “But he wasn’t going to hurt me—”

“So you think! I happen to know he intended to kill you.” That wasn’t exactly true, but it served its purpose. If they lived, Megan wouldn’t get him in trouble for endangering her life. She even began babbling something about a reward, and Flandry hoped she would remember it later. If there was a later.

He had one advantage. The duke could not use heavy stuff to blow them all up without killing his prisoner. But—He passed out three gas masks.

The outer wall glowed. A circle was being cut from it, big enough to let a dozen men through at a time. Flandry and Ella could blast the first wave, but the next would overpower them.

Smoke swirled heavy and bitter in the room. It was hot, stinking of sweat and blood. Flandry grinned crookedly. “Well, darling,” he said, “it was a nice try.” Ella’s hand stroked his hair, briefly.

Something bellowed outside. The walls trembled, and he heard the rumble and crash of falling masonry. Outside, the noise of blasters and bullets grew to a storm.

"Chives!" whooped Flandry.

"What?" asked Megan faintly.

"Salade of Alfred au naturel with Chives," burbled Flandry. "You must meet Chives, your Highness. One of nature's noblemen. He—how the hell did he do it?"

A volcano growled outside, the walls glowed red, and then there was silence.

Flandry pulled the burning sofa away and risked a glance into the corridor. It was a ruin, scorched and tumbled by the full impact of a naval blaster canon. The attacking troopers had simply ceased to exist. A series of smashed walls showed open sky far beyond. Hovering in the wreckage was his own lean speedster.

"Chives," said Flandry in awe, "merely swooped up to the fortress at full drive, blew his way in with the guns and bombs, and opened up on the duke's men."

The airlock swung wide, and a green head looked out. "I would recommend haste, sir," said Chives. "The alarm is out, and they have fighting ships."

He extended a ladder. Flandry and the girls tumbled up it, the airlock clanged shut behind them, and the boat took off with a yell. Behind it, a small cruiser lifted from the military field.

"How did you find us?" gasped Flandry. "I didn't even know where the harem was myself when I called you."

“I assumed there would be fighting, sir,” said Chives modestly. “Blasters ionize the air. I used the radiation detectors to fix your direction as I approached.” He set the boat on autopilot and moved over to the tiny galley.

Flandry studied the viewscreens as the planet fell beneath them. “That cruiser—” he muttered. “No—look at the radar—we’re distancing it. This can of ours has legs. We’ll make it to Varrak all right.”

He glanced about the cabin. Ella was trying to soothe a hysterical Megan. She looked up at him for a moment and he saw glory in her eyes.

“Our only worry,” he said, “is that dear Alfred might rise in open revolt now that he’s exposed. If that happens, Merseia would probably move in and we’d have a general war on our hands.”

Chives looked up from the stove. “His Grace was directing the assault on your stronghold, sir,” he said. “When I fired on the soldiers, I fear I took the liberty of disintegrating the duke as well. Does her Highness take sugar or lemon in her tea?

THE TROUBLEMAKERS

A bright dream, and an old one—the same dream which had lived in Pythias, Columbus, Ley, in hundreds and thousands of men and in man himself, and which now looked up to the stars.

Earth was subdued; the planets had been reached and found wanting; if the dream were not to die, the stars must come next. It was known that most of them must have planets, that the worlds which could hold man were numbered in the millions—but the nearest of them was more than a lifetime away. Man could not wait for the hypothetical faster-than-light drive, which might never be found—nothing in physics indicated such a possibility, and if the vision of the frontier, which had become a cultural basic transcending questions of merely material usefulness, were not to wither and die, a start of some kind must be made.

The Pioneer, *first of her class, was launched in 2126. A hundred and twenty-three years to Alpha Centauri—five or six generations, more than a long lifetime—but the dream would not be denied…*

—Enrico Yamatsu, *Starward!*

"Have you anything to say before your sentence is passed?"

Evan Friday looked around him, slowly, focusing on all the details which he might never see again. Guilty! After all his hopes, after the wrangling and the waiting and the throttled futile anger, guilty. It hadn't even taken them long to decide; they'd debated perhaps half an hour before coming out with the verdict.

Guilty.

Behind him, the spectators had grown silent. There weren't many of them here in person, though he knew that half the ship must be watching him through the telescreens. Mostly they were officer class, sitting stiff and uniformed in their chairs, regarding him out of carefully blanked faces. The benches reserved for crewfolk were almost empty—less color in the garments, more life in the expression, but a life that despised him and seemed to feel only a suppressed glee that one more officer had gotten what was coming to him.

There were five sitting before him, judge and jury in full uniform. Above them, the arching wall displayed a mural, a symbolic figure of Justice crowned with a wreath of stars. The woman-image was stately, but he thought with bitterness that the artist had gotten in a hint of sluttishness. Appropriate.

His eyes went back to the five who were the Captain's Court. They were the rulers of the ship as well, the leaders and representatives of the major factions aboard. Three were officers pure and simple, with the bone-bred hauteur of their class—Astrogation, Administration, and Engineering. The fourth was Wilson, speaking for the crew, a big coarse man with the beefy hands of a laborer. He was getting fat, after five years of politics.

Captain Gomez was in the center. He was tall and lean, with a fine halo of white hair fringing his gaunt unmoving face. You couldn't know what he was thinking; the loneliness of his post had reached into him during his forty-three years as master. A figurehead now, but impressive, and—

Friday licked his lips and drew himself up straighter. He was twenty-four years old, and had been schooled in the rigid manners of the Astro officer's caste throughout all that time. Those habits held him up now. He was surprised at the steadiness of his tones:

"Yes, sir, I would like to say a few words.

"In the first place, I am not guilty. I have never so much as thought of bribery, sedition, or mutiny. There is nothing in my past record which would indicate anything of the sort. The evidence on which I have been convicted is the flimsiest tissue of fabrications, and several witnesses have committed perjury. I am surprised that this court even bothered of finding me guilty, and can only suppose that it is a frameup to cover someone else. However, there is little I can do about that now. My friends will continue to work for a reversal of this decision, and meanwhile I must accept it.

"Secondly, I would like to say that the fact of my being falsely accused is not strange. It is a part of the whole incredible pattern of mismanagement, selfishness, treachery, and venality which has perverted the great idea of this voyage. The *Pioneer* was to reach the stars. She carried all the hopes of Earth, ten years of labor and planning, an incredible money investment, and a mission of supreme importance. Eighty years later, what do we have? An unending succession of tyrannies, revolutions, tensions, hatreds, corruptions—all the social evils which Earth so painfully overcame, reborn between the stars. The goal has been forgotten in a ceaseless struggle for power which is used only to oppress. I have said this much before, in private. Presumably some right of free speech still exists, for I was not arrested on such charges. Therefore, I repeat it in public. Gentlemen and crew, I ask you to think what this will lead to. I ask you in what condition we will reach Centauri, if we do so at all. I ask you to consider who is responsible. I know it will prejudice my personal cause, but I make a solemn charge of my own: that two successive Captains have failed to exercise due authority, that the Captaincy has become a farce and a figurehead, that the officers have become a tyrant caste and the crew an ignorant mob. I tell the whole ship that something will have to be done, and soon, if the expedition is not to be a failure and a death trap.

"If this is sedition and mutiny, so be it."

He finished formally: "Thank you, gentlemen." The blood was hot in his face, he knew he was flushing and was angry with himself for it, he knew that he was shivering a little, and he knew that his words had been meaningless gibberish to the five men.

But the crew, and the better officers—?

Gomez cleared his throat, and spoke dryly: "I am sure idealism is creditable, especially in so young a man—provided that it is not a cover for something else, and that it is properly expressed. But there is also a tradition that junior officers should be seen and not heard, and that they are hardly prepared to govern a ship and seven thousand human beings. The court will remember your breach of discipline, Mr. Friday, in reviewing your case."

He leaned forward. "You have been found guilty of crimes which are punishable by death or imprisonment. However, in view of the defendant's youth and his previous good record, the court is disposed to leniency. Sentence is therefore passed that you shall be stripped of all title, honor, and privilege due to your rank, that your personal property shall be sequestered, and that you shall be reduced to a common crewman with assignment to the Engineering Section.

"Court dismissed."

The judges rose and filed out. Friday shook his head, trying to clear it of a buzzing faintness, trying to ignore the eyes and the voices at his back. A police sergeant fell in on either side of him. He thrust away the arm which one extended, and walked out between them.

The gray coverall felt stiff and scratchy against his skin. They had given him two changes of clothing and a couple of dollars to last till payday, and that was all which remained to him now. He went centerward, between the policemen, hardly noticing the walls and doors, shafts and faces.

The cops weren't bad fellows. They had looked the other way while he said good-bye to his parents. His mother had cried but his father, drilled into the reserve expected of an officer, had only been able to wring his hand and mutter awkwardly: "You shouldn't have spoken that way, Evan. It didn't help matters. But we'll keep working for you, and—and good luck, my son." With a sudden flaring of the old iron pride: "Whatever happens, and whatever they say, remember you are still an officer of Astrogation!"

That had hurt perhaps most of all, and at the same time it had held more comfort than anything else. An officer, an officer, an officer—before God, still an officer of Astro!

It embarrassed the policemen. He was their inferior now, a plain crewman to be kicked around and kept in order, but he was of the Friday blood and he kept the manners they were trained to salute. They didn't know how to act.

One of them finally said, slowly and clumsily: "Look, you're in for some trouble, I'm afraid. Can you fight?"

"I was taught self-defense, yes," said Friday. Fitness was part of the code in all of Astro—which, after all, was composed exclusively of officers—as it was of only the upper ranks in Engineering and hardly at all in

Administration. It belonged to the pattern; Astro was the smallest faction aboard, but it was the aristocracy of the aristocracy and at present it held the balance of power. “Why do you ask?”

“You’ll have quite a few slugfests. Crewmen don’t like officers, and when one gets kicked downstairs to them they take it out on him.”

“But—I never hurt anybody. Damn it, I’ve been their friend!”

“Can’t expect ’em all to see it that way. But stand up to ’em, be free and friendly—forget that manner of yours, remember you’re one of them now—and it’ll come out all right.”

“You mean you police permit brawling?”

“Not too much we can do about it, as long riots don’t start. You can file a complaint with us if somebody beats you up, but I wouldn’t advise it. They’d never take you in then. Somebody might murder you.”

“I won’t come crawling to anybody,” said Friday with the stiffness of outrage. Underneath it was a horrible tightening in his throat.

“That’s what I said: you’ve got to quit talking that way. Crewmen aren’t a bad sort but you can’t live with ’em if you keep putting on airs. Just keep your mouth shut for awhile, till they get used to you.”

The three men went down unending corridors, shafts, and companion ways. Gravity lightened as they approached the axis of the ship. From the numbers on doors, Friday judged that they were bound for Engineering Barracks Three, which lay aft of the main gyros and about halfway between axis and top deck, but pride wouldn’t allow him to ask if he was right.

They were well out of officer territory now. The halls were still clean, but somehow drabber and dingier; residential apartments were smaller and poorly furnished; shops, taverns, theaters and other public accommodations blinked neon signs at the opposite wall, fifteen feet away;

the clangor of metalworking dinned faintly in the background. Crewfolk swarmed here and there, drab-clad for work or gaudy for pleasure, men and women and a horde of children. Most of the men wore close haircuts and short beards, in contrast to the clean-shaven officers, and they were noisy and pushing and not too clean. Many of them looked after the policemen and pursed or spat. Friday felt unease crawling along his spine.

“Here we are.”

He stopped, and looked ahead of him with a certain panicky blurring in his eyes. The doorway, entrance to one of the barracks for unmarried workers, was like a cave. The other doors on that side of the corridor, as far as he could see, opened into the same racketing darkness; the opposite wall was mostly blank, with side halls and companionways widely spaced. Two or three men, shooting dice some way down the corridor, were looking up and he saw their faces harden.

“We could go in with you,” said one of the police apologetically, “but it’ll be better for you if we don’t. Good luck—Mr. Friday.”

“Thank you,” he said. His voice was husky.

He stood for a moment looking at the door. The crapshooters got up and started slowly toward him. He wondered if he should bolt in, decided against it, and managed a stiff nod as the strangers came up.

“How do you do?”

“What’s the trouble, jo?” The speaker was big and blocky and red-haired. “Been boozin?”

“Nah.” Another man narrowed his eyes. This’s that guy Friday. The one they broke today. They sent ’em down here.”

“Here? Friday? Well, I’ll be scuttered!” The first crewman bowed elaborately. “Howdedo, Mister Ensign Friday, howdedo an’ welcome to our humble ay-bode.”

“Mebbe we sh’d roll out a rug, huh?”

“How’d y’ like y’r eggs done, sir, sunny side up ’r turned?”

“Please,” said Friday, “I would like to find my bunk.” He recognized the condescending coldness in his voice too late.

“He’d like to find his bunk!” Someone grinned nastily. “Shall we show ’im, boys?”

Friday pushed himself free and went into the barracks.

It was gloomy inside, for a moment he was almost blind. Ventilators could not remove the haze of smoke and human sweat. Bunks lined the walls in two tiers, stretching enormously into a farther twilight. Pictures, mostly of nude women, were pasted on the walls, and the walls, and the floor, while not especially dirty or littered, was a mess of shoes, clothes, tables, and chairs. Most of the light came from a giant-size telescreen, filling one wall with its images—the mindless, tasteless sort of program intended for this class—and the air with its noise. Perhaps a hundred men off duty were in the room sleeping, lounging, gambling, watching the show, most of them wearing little but shorts.

Friday had been “crewquartering” before with companions of his age and class, but he’d stuck to the bars and similar places; his knowledge of this aspect had been purely nominal. It was a sudden feeling of being caged, a retching claustrophobia, which brought him around to face the others. They had followed him in, and stood blocking the doorway.

“Hey, boys!” The shout rang and boomed through the hollow immensity of the room, skittered past the raucousness of the telescreen and shivered faintly in the metal walls. “Hey, look who we got! Come over here and meet Mister Friday!”

Eyes, two hundred eyes glittering out of smoke and dark, and nowhere to go, nowhere to go. *They're going to beat me up. They're going to slug me, and I can't get away from it, I'll have to take it.*

He raised his voice above the savage jeering as they pressed in: "Why do you think I was sent down here? Why did they want to get rid of me, up above? Because I wanted you people to have some rights. I never hurt a crewman yet. Damn it, I couldn't have, I was always working with other officers."

"Here's your chance," grunted somebody. "I'll take him."

They squabbled for awhile over the privilege, while two men held Friday's arms. The big redhead who had first accosted him won.

"Let him go, boys," he said. "Give him a chance to in-tro-juice himself proper like. I'm Sam Carter, Mr. Friday." His teeth flashed white in the smoky dusk. "And I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Chawmed, I am shu-ah," cried a voice, anonymous in the roiling twilight.

Friday had learned the techniques of boxing, wrestling, and infighting in all gravities from zero to Earth. He had enjoyed it, and been considered better than average. But Carter outmassed him thirty pounds, and officers didn't fight to hurt.

After awhile Friday lost fear, forgot pain, and wanted nothing in all the world but to smash that red grinning face into ruin. Up and down, in and out, around and around, slug, duck, guard, slug, jar, and the mob hooting and howling out of the shadows. Hit him, right cross to the jaw, left to the belly, *oof!*

It took Sam Carter a long time to knock him down for good, and the crewman was hardly able to stand, himself, when it was done. There wasn't much cheering. A couple of men hauled Friday to a vacant bunk, and went back to whatever they had been doing before he came.

Slowly, Friday adjusted.

At first it was not quite real, it was a horror which could not have happened to him. He, Ensign Evan Friday, rising in Astro, minor social lion, all the ship before him—he, who meant to do something about correcting injustice when he had the power, but who knew he could wait and savor his own life, he just wasn't the sort of person who was accused and condemned and degraded. Those things happened to others, actually guilty in the struggle for control, or to the heroes of books from the Earth he had never seen—they didn't happen to *him!*

He came out of that daze into grinding nightmare. It took him days to recover from the beating he had had, and before he was quite well somebody else took him on, somebody whom he managed to defeat this time but who left him aching and hurt. Nevertheless, he was sent to work two watches after his arrival, and to the clumsiness of the recruit and the screaming of unaccustomed muscles his injuries were added.

Being ignorant of all shopwork, he was sent to unskilled, heavy labor, jumping at everyone's shout with boxes, machine parts, tools, metal beams. Low gravity helped somewhat, but not enough—they simply assumed he could lift that much more mass, without regard to its inertia. His bewildered awkwardness drew curses and pay dockings. The racket of the shops seemed to din in his head every time he tried to sleep, and he could never get all the grime out of his skin and clothes.

Without friends, money, or a decent suit, he stayed in the barracks when the others went out to drink, wench, or see a show. But somebody was always around with him, and the telescreen was never turned off. He thought he would go crazy before he learned how to ignore it, but he knew better than to protest.

The men stopped bullying him after awhile, since he was disconcertingly handy with his fists, but it took weeks before the practical jokes ended. Short-sheeting and tying water-soaked knots in clothing were all right; he'd done that to others when he was younger; but hiding his shoes, pouring water in his bed and paint in his hair, slipping physics into his food—childish, but a vicious sort of childishness that made him wonder why he had ever felt sorry for this class.

He used the public facilities, bed and board and bath, since he could not afford the private home which theoretically was his to rent. He joined the union, since no one ever failed to, though it galled him to pay money into Wilson's war chest—Wilson, the parvenu, who wanted to run the officers that ran the ship! But otherwise he refused to conform, though it would have made things easier. He shaved, and kept his hair long, and fought to retain precision and restraint in his speech. He talked as little as possible to anyone, and spent most of his free time lying on his bunk thinking.

The loneliness was great. Sometimes, when he thought of his friends, when he remembered his quiet book-lined room, he wanted to cry. It was a closed world now. Crewmen simply didn't go into officer territory except on business.

Well, they might get him cleared. Meanwhile, the best thing he could do was to improve his position.

He worked with machines now and then, and was a little surprised to discover he had a fair amount of innate ability. Books from the crew branch of the ship's library taught him more, and presently he applied for promotion to machinist's assistant, By now he was tolerated, though still disliked, and made a good enough showing on test to get the job. It meant a raise, better working conditions, and one step further. The next was to be a machinist himself, one of the all-around men who were troubleshooters and extempore inventors—that was one grade higher than foreman, a job he could bypass.

Before God, he thought, *I'll get back to officer if I have to work my way!*

Theoretically, it was possible. But in practice there were only so many commissions to go around, and if you didn't belong to the right families you didn't get them.

He grew friendly with his immediate boss, a pleasant, older man who was not at all averse to letting him do most of the work and learn thereby. Gradually, he got onto drinking terms with a few others. They weren't bad fellows, not entirely the sadistic savages he had imagined. They laughed more than the upper classes, and they often went to school in their spare time, or saved money to start a small business, in spite of the disadvantages under which tradesmen labored.

For that matter, crew conditions weren't the slummish horror which sentimentalists had pictured. Folk were poor, but they had the basic necessities and a few of the comforts. Violence was not uncommon, but it was simply one facet of a life which, on the whole, was fairly secure. Indeed, perhaps its worst feature was dullness.

Still, if another of the minor wars which had torn the ship before broke out—Something was wrong. This wasn't the way man should go out to the stars, high of heart and glad of soul. Somehow, the great dream had gone awry.

It was a major triumph when Friday met Sam Carter in a beer hall and they went on a small bat together. He found himself liking the big red-headed man. And Carter got into the habit of asking him endless questions—science, history, politics; an officer was supposed to know everything. Friday began to, discover how deficient his own education was. He knew physics and mathematics well, had a fair grounding in some other sciences and had been exposed all his life to the best of Earth's art, literature, and music. But—what was this psychology, anyway? It was a scientific study of human behavior, yes, and it had advanced quite far on Earth by the time the ship left—but why had he never been taught anything but the barest smattering? For that matter, did anybody in the upper ranks ever speak of it?

That might be the reason why the ship's great dream had snarled into a crazy welter of murderous petty politics. Sheer ignorant fumbling on the part of the leaders, even with the best intentions—and he knew many intentions were and had been bad—could have let matters degenerate. Only—why? It would have been so easy to include a few psychologists.

Unless—unless those psychologists had been eliminated early in the game, say at the end of that serene first decade of travel, by the power-hungry and the greedy. But then the whole foundation of his society was rottener than he had imagined. Then even his own class was founded on betrayal.

None of which, he reflected grimly, was going to be any help at all when the ship got to Centauri.

If it ever did!

Perhaps still another revolution was needed, a revolt of the dreamers to whom the voyage meant something. Only—only there'd been too many mutinies and gang wars already, and more were brewing with every passing watch. The officers were split along departmental lines—Astros, Engys, and Admys—and on questions of personal power and general policy. The common crewfolk were nominally represented by Wilson, but some demon seemed to stir them up against each other, workers with machines and on farms, plain deckhands, technicians of all kinds of grades, hating each other and rioting in the corridors. Then there were the chants and small manufacturers, fighting for a return to the old free enterprise system or, at least, a separate voice on the Council. There were the goons maintained by each faction, as well as by powerful individuals, bully gangs outnumbering the better-armed police, who were directly under the Captain. But the Captain was a puppet, giving the orders of whatever momentary group or men held the reins of effective power.

This ship isn't going to Centauri, thought Friday. *It's going to Hell!*

Time aboard the *Pioneer* was divided into the days of twenty-four hours, the weeks of seven and the years of three hundred sixty-five and a quarter days, which had prevailed on Earth. But except for a few annual festivals, there were no special holidays. Working shifts were staggered around the clock, and there was always a certain percentage of the shops and other public places open. For what meaning did time have? It was the movement of clock hands, the succession of meals and tasks and sleeps, the arbitrary marks on a calendar. In a skyless, weatherless, seasonless world, a world whose only dark came with the flicking of a light switch in a room, one hour was as good as another for anything. The economic setup was such that the standard thirty-hour work week provided the common crewman a living wage, and there was not enough work to do for overtime hours to be usual. Most people kept to such a schedule, and passed their leisure with whatever recreation was available and to their tastes. Some preferred to work only part time and to do something else for the rest of their money—

one thought especially of the *filles de joie* who, though frowned on by the officer caste, were an accepted part of the crew world; and the arrogant goons were another instance. The tradesmen, independent artisans, artists, writers, and others who worked for themselves made their own hours. Some of these lived in officer territory, the pet of a patron or caterers to the entire area; most were in and of the commons.

Evan Friday wandered with a couple of friends—Sam Carter and a dark, slim, intense nineteen-year-old named John Lefebre—into Park Seven, not far aft of the main gyros. The workers were idle, a little bored, and Friday had wearied of spending too much time in the library. He had been reading a good deal, concentrating on the history of the ship and groping for the cause of its social breakdown, but it baffled him and he was still young.

He had realized with a little shock that he had been a crewman for almost six months. So long? Gods, but time went, day after day of sameness, days and weeks and months and years till the end of life and flaming oblivion in the energy converters. Time went, and he was caught in its stream and carried without will or strength. Sometimes he wondered if he would ever get back to the topdeck world. Increasingly it became dim, a dream flickering on the edge of reality, and only once in a while would its sharp remembrance bring him awake with a gasp of pain.

He had shaken down pretty well, he thought. He was accepted in the barracks, though his reserve still kept most of the men at a distance. But they called him “Doc” and referred arguments to his superior education. He was used to shop routine, learning fast and getting close to the promotion he wanted. Next step—superintendent—maybe! He had been invited to the apartments of crew families, and went out drinking or gambling or ballplaying with the others. It wasn’t too bad a life, really, and that was in a way the most horrible part of his situation.

They went down a long series of halls until finally one opened on the park. This was one of several such areas scattered through the ship, a great vaulted space half a mile on a side, floored with dirt and turf, covered with hedges and trees and fountains—a glimpse of old Earth, here in the steel immensity of the ship. There were ball courts and a swimming pool and hidden private places under fantastically huge low-gravity flowers. Not far from the boundary of grass were a couple of beer parlors—fun for all the family.

“Get up some volley ball?” asked Lefebre.

“Not yet,” yawned Friday. “Let’s sit for a while.” He went his words one better, by flopping full length on the grass. It was cool and moist and firm against his bare skin, with a faint pungency of mould which stirred vague wistful instincts in him. His eyes squinted up to the ceiling, where the illusion of blue sky and wandering clouds and a fiery globe of sun had been created.

Was Earth like this? he wondered. Had his grandparents spurned this for a prison of steel and energy, walled horizons and narrow rooms and an unknowable destiny which they would never see? He closed his eyes and tried, as often before, to imagine Earth. He had been in the parks, he had seen all the films and read all the books and learned all the words, but still it wouldn’t come real. In spite of having ventured outside the ship a few times, he couldn’t quite imagine being under a sky which was not a roof, looking out to a horizon that hazed into blue distance, seeing a mountain or a sea. Words, pictures, images—a fantasy without meaning.

Rain, what was rain? Water spilling from the sky, sweet and cold and wet on his body, damp smell of earth and a misty wind blowing into his eyes—whenever he tried to imagine himself out in the rain, it was merely grotesque, not the thing of which the books wrote with such tenderness.

Someday, when he was old, the ship would reach far Centauri and he might stand under a streaming heaven and see lightning, but he couldn't think it now and he wondered if his old body would even like it.

It would take all the courage and purpose in the ship for men to adapt back to planetary life, the more so if the planet turned out to be very different than Earth.

What chance would a divided, tyrannized, corrupted mob have? What fantastic blindness had made Captain Petrie unable to see the spreading cancer and excise it? Or had he, like his successor Gomez, been merely the pawn and abettor of the greedy and the brutal? What had happened, back in the early days of the voyage? What had gone wrong?

"What'cha thinking about now, Doc?" asked Carter.

"Hm? Oh—oh, the usual." Friday blinked himself back to full consciousness. "Remembering how things were when this trip began, and trying to find who or what's to blame for their changing ever since."

"Was—were things really so fine then?" asked Lefebre. "Aren't you, uh, romanticizing it?"

"No, no. I've read the official log, remember, as well as other writings. And it was only eighty years ago, not time for many legends to form."

"Well—what was so good then, anyway?" asked Carter.

"The ship was all one unit. Everybody had one great purpose, to get to Centauri, and everybody worked for it. There weren't these social divisions that have grown up since, officers and men were almost like friends, anybody could reach the top on sheer merit, nobody was after himself or his little group above the ship. There wasn't bribery, or fighting, or—oh, all the things which have happened ever since.

“Of course,” went on Friday thoughtfully, “there were a lot fewer people then, and they had more to do. Only about two hundred in all, men and women. You know the population’s supposed to build up and be at our maximum of ten thousand or so by the end of the trip. But we’re only around seven thousand now, that’d be a small town on Earth—damn it, there’s no reason for our splitting into castes and factions this way, it’s ridiculous … Anyway, the ship was more or less of a skeleton inside, the idea was for the crew to complete work on it en route. That was so they could get started sooner, and have more to do. Good idea, and it took ten or twenty years at their easy pace.”

“We still have to make things,” said Carter. “What d’you think we’re doing in the shops, anyway?”

“Sure, sure. Machines wear out and have to be replaced, repairs are needed here and there, new machines and facilities are built, oh, we have a whole little industry that keeps the factory division of the Engy department busy. Then there are the men in the black gang, different deck hands and technicians—we don’t have the robot stuff we could make, there’s no need for it with plenty of human labor available. My point is, things have stabilized. There’s only so much work to be done these days, nearly all of it pure routine, so maybe people get bored. Maybe that’s one reason we fight each other.”

“The trouble started with capitalism,” said Lefebre. He had all the dogmatic conviction of his years. “I’ve been reading books too, Doc, and heard speeches, and been thinking for myself. Any ship is a natural communist state. There was no reason to let private people have the farms and the factories and the rec places. What happened? Companies got started, fought each other, op—oppressed the workers, who had to form unions in self-defense; the food processors won out over the producers and formed their own trust; while Engy slowly took over the industries. Then food and factories started fighting, trying to run the ship, trying to stir up each other's workers—"

"So eventually the farms were collectivized, turned into one big food factory," said Friday. "Isn't that what you wanted? It hasn't helped much."

"The damage had already been done," said Lefebre. "The idea of fighting over power had been planted. Only thing to do now is to socialize everything, put it under the Captain's Council, and give the workers the main voice."

Friday had argued with the boy before. There was a strong communist movement aboard, chiefly under Wilson's leadership. *That fat demagogue! A lot of say his precious workers would have if he got what he wants!* Then there were the Guilds and their agitation for a return to the original petite-bourgeois system, their claim that the initial evil had been the formation of monopolies. And there were the officers, most of them obsessed by the aristocratic ideal, though to them it meant no more than the increase of personal authority and wealth.

Friday's upbringing prejudiced him in that direction. Damn it, a ship was not a politicking communism, neither was it a realm of little, short-sighted tradesmen. It was the rule of the best, the aristos, a hierarchy restrained by law and tradition and open on a competitive basis to anyone with ability. But it had to be an unquestioned rule, or you got the sort of anarchy which had prevailed aboard the *Pioneer.*

"To hell with it," said Carter. "Let's play some ball."

They got up and strolled over to the courts. The park was, as usual, pretty well filled with crewfolk of all ages, sexes, and classes, generally dressed in the shorts which were the garb of ordinary lounging. Except for the convenience of pockets, clothes were a superfluity when you weren't on the job. Friday wondered how the arrivals at Centauri would stand a winter—another half mythical concept. Ship "weather" was a variation of temperature and ozone balance in the cycle long known to be most beneficial, but the change was so slow and between such narrow limits that it was unnoticeable. Winter—what was winter?

There were several other Engys sitting on the edge of the volley ball court, watching the game in progress with sour faces. "What's the matter, jo?" asked Carter of one.

"Goddam farmers been there for two hours now."

With an uneasy tingle along his spine, Friday noticed the characteristic green worn by workers in the food areas—hydroponic gardens, animal pens, and packing plants.

There were a lot of them, sitting some ways off and watching a game whose slowness made it clear that its purpose was to taunt the Engys by keeping the court occupied. Theoretically, the food and factory unions were sub-divisions of Wilson's crew-embracing Brotherhood of Workers. In practice, a feud had been going on for—how long, now? Ever since the early violence in the days of the monopolies. It was aggravated by differences in wages, working conditions, the thousand petty irritations of shipboard life. They hated each other's guts.

"Something," said Carter after a while, "oughta be done about this."

He started forward with an unholy gleam in his eyes. Friday caught his arm. "For God's sake, Sam, you aren't going to fight like a bunch of children over the use of a ball park, are you?"

"Ain't busted in a farmer's teeth for him in a long time now," muttered someone behind him.

Friday saw the men gathering into a loose knot. Blackjacks and knuckle-dusters were coming out of pockets, heavy-buckled belts were being slipped off. The greens, seeing trouble afoot, vented the mob-growl which is the signal for all wise men to start running, and drew themselves together.

Unthinking habit took over, officer's training. Friday was dimly surprised to find himself sprinting out onto the court.

"Stop that!" he yelled. "Break it up!"

The players halted, one by one, and he met sullen eyes. "What'sa matter?"

"You've had your turn playing. Can't you see a riot will start if you don't come back now?"

Faces turned to faces, mouths split into the grin he remembered from his first hour as a crewman. "Well!" said somebody elaborately. "Well, well, well! Now isn't that just a dirty crying shame?"

He saw the fist coming and rolled, taking it on his shoulder. His own flicked out, caught the green in the jaw; stepping in close, he let the other hand smack its way into the muscled stomach.

The rest closed in on him, and he saw the gray ranks pouring onto the court to his rescue, and the greens after them. With a stabbing sickness, he realized that his own attempt had fired off the riot.

There was a swirl of bodies around him, impact and noise, metal flashing under the artificial sun. He slugged at short range, drowned in the shouting, frantic to get away. Taller than average he could look over the surging close-cropped heads and see more men on their way. The thing was growing.

Someone slapped at him with a blackjack. He caught the blow on an uplifted arm, numbing it in a crash of pain. Viciously, he kneed the man, yanked the weapon loose, and flailed the screaming face. A fist hit him in the side, he went down and the feet trampled over him. Gasping, he struggled erect, slugged out half blindly. The howling current bore him off without strength to fight it. Through a haze of sweat and panic, he saw knives gleaming.

"Back! Get Out!"

The metal rod whistled around his head. He snarled incoherently and yanked it away. "I'm staying here," he mumbled.

"Get out, get out!" The man was screaming, a small frail gray-haired man with two women behind him. "Get out, we don't want you, you, you—rioter—"

Friday leaned against a counter, sobbing air into the harsh dryness of throat and lungs. A wave of dizziness passed through him, dark before his eyes and a distant roaring in his ears. No, no, that was the mob, screaming and thundering in the corridor outside.

A measure of strength returned. "I—not rioting—he forced through his teeth. "Wait here—only wait here—"

"Why—father, he's no crewman. He's an *officer*—"

Friday let it pass. He found a chair and slumped into it, letting nerves and muscles recover. He noticed dimly that he had been slashed here and there, blood was pooling onto the floor, but it hadn't started hurting much yet.

"Here, take this."

The girl had brought him a glass of whiskey. He downed it in a grateful gulp, letting its vividness scorch down his gullet and run warmly along his veins. Awareness began to come back.

He had stumbled into a small shop, a poor and dingy place cluttered with tools and handicrafts. Plastics mostly, he noticed, with some woodwork and metal, the small ornaments and household objects still produced by private parties. Besides himself, there were the man and his wife, and the girl who must be their daughter. *She was about nineteen or twenty,* he thought in the back of his mind, *a slim blonde without extraordinary looks but with a degree of aliveness in her which was unusual.*

The shopkeeper had locked the door by now. Apparently the riot—and Friday—had swept this way with a speed that took him by surprise. He was close to tears. "They'll start looting now," he said, "They always do. And it isn't a strong lock."

"The police should be here soon," said Friday.

"Not soon enough. I was looted once before. If it happens again, I'm ruined, I'll have to take a crew job—"

"You're hurt," said the girl. "Here, wait a minute, I'll get the kit." Friday could barely hear her voice above the echoing din of the riot, but he watched her with pleasure.

Bodies surged against the plate window until its plastic shivered. A man was backed against it and another one swung a knife and opened his throat. Blood blurred the view, and the girl screamed and hid her face against Friday's breast.

"I—I'm all right now," she whispered presently. "Here, the bandages—"

He had to admire her. *He* still wanted to vomit.

The door shook. "They're trying to batter it down! They want to get in before the police arrive! Oh, God—"

Friday took the metal bar and went over to the door. He felt a vicious glee which was not at all proper to an officer and a gentleman. “You should keep a gas gun handy,” he remarked,

“You know only officers are allowed weapons—but the bullies make their own—Oh, oh, help—”

The door broke under three brawny shoulders. Friday swung the improvised club with a whistle and a crack. The first man went down on that blow and did not move. The second, carrying a shaft of his own, raised it in guard. Friday, remembering his fencing, jabbed him in the belly and he screamed and stumbled back with his hands to the wound. The third one fled.

They had been greens, which was something of a relief. Friday would have fought grays as willingly, but that could have been awkward for him later, if he were recognized.

He felt a return of the sick revulsion. God, God, God, what had become of the ship? Why did anyone ever feel sorry for these witless, lawless animals? What they needed was an officer caste, and—

He heard whistles blowing and the heart-stirring cadence of marching feet. The police had arrived. He shoved his green victim—unconscious or dead, he didn’t much care which—outside and closed the door. “Turn your fans on full,” he said. “They’ll be using gas.”

“Oh, you—” The older woman sought for words. “You were wonderful, sir.”

Friday preened himself, smiling at the girl, whose answering expression was quite dazzling, “Don’t ‘sir’ me, please,” he said, trying to find words which wouldn’t sound too story-book silly in retrospect. “I’m only an Engy at present, though I’ve no use for rioters of any class.” He bowed, falling back on the formal manners of topdeck. “Evan Friday, your servant, sir and ladies.”

They didn’t recognize the name, which disappointed him more than he thought it should. But he got their own names—William Johnson, wife Ingrid, daughter Elena—arid an invitation to dinner next “day.” He left feeling quite smug about the whole affair.

Paradoxically, the exhibition which had soured Friday on all crewmen led to his forming more friendships among them than ever before. Word spread that Doc had been in on the very start of the fight, been wounded; laid some undetermined but respectable number of greens low, and in general acquitted himself like a good Engy. Men struck up talk with him, bought him drinks, listened to his remarks—strange how warming a plain “hello” could be when he came to work. He was more than merely accepted, and in his solitude could not prevent himself from responding emotionally.

Training told him that an officer and a gentleman had no business associating with any of these—-these mutineers. Prudence, a need of friends, and a growing shrewd realization that if he hoped to accomplish anything he would have to fit into the lower deck milieu, made him reply in kind. He retained his eccentricities, haircut and shave and faint stiffness of manner, noticing that once his associates were used to these they marked him out, made him something of a leader.

His plans were vague. There had been no word from topside, no word at all, though he supposed his family was keeping track of him. Once, in a tavern, he had encountered a group of crew quartering young aristocrats, friends of his, and his sister among them; there had been an embarrassed exchange of greetings and he had left as soon as possible. The upper world was shut off. But if he could attain some prominence down here, get influential friends, money—Surely he couldn't remain a crewman all his life! Such anticlimaxes just didn't happen to Evan Friday.

He was doing a good deal of work in close collaboration with the superintendent of his shop. The intricacies of the job were resolving themselves; he could handle it. He began to speculate on ways of displacing his superior. It did not occur to him that he might be pulling a dirty trick on another human being.

But something else was going on that distracted his attention. Strangers were dropping into the barracks, husky young men who, it became clear were full-time attendants of Wilson—in less euphemistic language, his goons. They talked to various workers, bought drinks—recruited! Rumors buzzed around: there was a cache of weapons somewhere, there was this or that dastardly plot afoot which must be forestalled, there was to be a general strike for higher pay and better conditions of work and living! Certainly a young man could make extra money and have some fun by signing on as a part-time goon. You learned techniques of fighting, you drilled a little bit, you played athletic games and had occasional beer parties with old Tom Wilson footing the bill. It had been some time since the last pitched battle between goon squads, but by God, jo, those officers' men were getting too big in the head strutting around like they owned the ship, it might be time to scutter them a bit.

"They wanted me to join," said Carter. "I told 'em no."

"Good man!" said Friday.

Carter ran a big work-roughened hand through his red stubble. "I ain't looking for trouble, Doc," he said. "I'm saving to get married." He scowled. "Only, well, maybe we will have to fight. Maybe we won't get our rights no other way. And if they did fight, and win, and I wasn't in on it, it'd look bad later on."

"That's the sort of gruff they've been feeding you, huh?"

"Well, Doc, you got a head on your shoulders. But—I dunno. I'll have to think it over."

Friday lay awake during many hours, wondering what was on the way. Certainly the other factions aboard knew what was going on—why did they allow it, then? Were they afraid to precipitate a general conflict? Or did they have plans of their own? Or did they think Wilson was merely bluffing?

What did the man want, anyway? He was on the Council already, wasn't he?

Couldn't they see—damn them, couldn't they see that the ship was bigger than all their stupid ambitions, couldn't they see that space was the great Enemy against which all souls aboard, all mankind had to unite?

A special meeting of the Brotherhood of Workers was called. Friday had only been to one union assembly before, out of a curiosity which was soon quenched by the incredible dullness of the proceedings. Men stood and haggled, hour after hour, over some infinitesimal point, they dozed through interminable speeches and reports, they took a whole watch to decide something that the Captain should have settled in one minute. He realized wryly that a major qualification of leadership was an infinite patience. And skill in maneuvering men, swapping favors, playing opponents off against each other, covering the operations that mattered with a blanket of parliamentary procedure and meaningless verbiage. But he had a notion that this meeting was one he should attend in person, not simply over a telescreen.

The hall was jammed, and the ventilators could not quite overcome the stink of sweating humanity. Friday wrinkled his aristocratic nose and pushed through to the section reserved for his grade, near the stage. He found a seat beside a friend with a similar job, and looked around the buzzing cavern. Faces, faces, faces, greens and grays intermingled, workmen all. In a moment of honesty, he had to admit that there was more variety and character in those faces than in the smooth soft countenance of the typical lower-bracket officer. These visages had been leaned down by a life-time of work, creased by squinting, dried by the hot wind of furnaces. He had gained considerable respect for manual skill; it took as much, in a way, to handle a lathe or a torch or a spraygun as to use slide rule and account book.

Only why should these complementary types be at War? They needed each other. Why couldn't they see the fact?

Several men filed onstage, accompanied by goons whose similar clothes suggested uniforms. Friday's mind wandered during the speech by the union's nominal president. The usual platitudes. He woke up when Wilson came to the rostrum.

He had to admit the Councillor was a personality. His voice was a superbly versatile instrument, rolling and roaring and sinking to a caress, drawing forth anger and determination and laughter. And the gross body, pacing back and forth, did not suggest fat, it was tigerishly graceful; a dynamo turned within the man. In spite of himself, Friday was caught up in the fascination.

Wilson deplored the riot, scolded his followers, exhorted them to forget their petty differences in the great cause of the voyage. He said he was recruiting "attendant auxiliaries" from green and gray alike, and mixing them up in squads, so that they could learn to know each other. They were fellow workers, they simply happened to have different jobs, they needed each other and the ship needed both.

"You *are* the ship! We've got to eat. We've got to have power, heat and light and air, tools, maintenance. *And nothing else.* Everybody else aboard is riding on your backs.

"Who keeps the ship moving? Who's pushing us to far Centauri? Not the officers' corps, not the Guildsmen, not the doctors and lawyers and teachers and policemen. Not even you, my friends. We reached terminal velocity eighty years ago. Old Man Inertia is carrying us to our far home. Don't let anybody claim credit for that, nobody but Almighty God.

"But we've got to eat on the way. We've got to have power to keep us alive, keep out the cold and the dark and the vacuum. Once landed, we'll still need all those things, we'll have to start farms and-machine shops. We need *you.* You, green and gray, are the keel of this ship, and don't you ever forget it!"

He went on, with a vast silence before him and no eye in the chamber leaving his face. The workers were one, they had to unite to see the ship through, their feuds were a hangover from the bad old days of unrestrained capitalism. He hinted broadly that certain elements kept the pot boiling, kept the workers divided among themselves lest they discover their true strength and speak up for their rights. He instilled the notion of cabals directed against the crewmen—"who make up more than six thousand people, out of seven thousand!" and of plots to overthrow the Council, establish all-out officer rule and crush the workers underfoot.

"God, no!" cried Friday. He caught himself and relapsed into his seat, half blind with rage. His outburst had gone unnoticed in the rising tide of muttered anger.

Trying to control himself, he analyzed the speech as it went on. A wonderful piece of demagoguery, yes. Nothing in it that could really be called seditious—on the surface, merely an exhortation to end rioting and general lawlessness. No one was mentioned by name except the Guilds, who didn't count anyway. No overt suggestion of violence was made. The Captain was always spoken of in respectful tones, the hint being that he was the unhappy prisoner of the plotters. A list of somewhat exaggerated grievances was given, but the ship's articles provided for freedom of speech and assembly. Oh, yes, very lawful, very dignified—and just what was needed to incite mutiny!

At the end, the cheering went on for a good quarter-hour. Friday clamped his teeth together, feeling ill with fury. When the racket had subsided, Wilson called for the customary question period.

Friday jumped up on his seat. "Yes," he shouted. "Yes, I have a question."

"By all means, brother Friday," said Wilson genially. So—he remembered.

"Are you preaching revolution," yelled Friday, "or are you lying because you can't help yourself?"

The silence was short and incredulous, then the howling began. Friday vaulted into the aisle and up onto the stage, too full of his rage to care what he was doing.

Wilson's voice boomed from the loudspeakers, slowly fighting down the tumult: "Brother Friday does not agree with me, it seems. He has a right to be heard. Gentlemen, gentlemen, quiet please!" When the booing had died down a little: "Now, sir, what do you wish to say? This is a free assembly of free men. Speak up."

"I say," said Friday, "that you are a liar and a mutineer. Your talk has been a stew of meaningless words, false accusations, and invitations to rebellion. Shall I go down the list?"

"By all means," smiled Wilson. "Brother Friday, you know, has a somewhat unusual background. I am sure his views are worth hearing."

The laughter was savage.

"I hardly know where to begin," said Friday.

"It is a little difficult, yes," grinned Wilson, The laughter hooted forth again, overwhelming him, knotting his tongue. He twisted the words out, slowly and awkwardly:

"Just for a start, then, Mr. Wilson, you said that the greens and grays together are almost the entire ship. Six out of seven thousand, you said. Anyone who's taken the trouble to read the latest census figures would know it's not true. There are about a thousand men working in all the branches of Engineering under officers; and about five hundred in the food section. There are about three hundred in public service of one sort or another—police, teachers, lawyers and judges, administrative clerks, and so on. Guildsmen and other independents together make up perhaps seven hundred. The entire officers' corps, *including their families,* add up to maybe five hundred. In short, out of some three thousand money-earning, working people aboard, greens and grays add up to half.

"I don't include the four thousand others—housewives, children and aged." With an essay at sarcasm: "Unless you want to enroll them in your goon squads too!" He turned to the assembly. "Fifteen hundred people in green and gray, to dictate to the other fifty-five hundred. Is that your precious democracy?"

"Boo! Boo! Throw 'im out! Spy! Blackleg! Boo!"

"You seem to be distorting my speech now," said Wilson mildly. "But go ahead, if it amuses you."

"God damn it, man, it's the ship I'm thinking about. I know there are plenty of abuses, I'm the victim of one myself—"

"Ah, yes, a pathetic fate," said Wilson lugubriously. "He was forced by incredibly cruel people to come down among us and earn his living!"

The shouting and the booing and cursing and laughing drove Friday off the stage. He hadn't a chance, he was beaten and routed; and he had been made ridiculous—which was much worse. He fled, sobbing in his throat, yelling at the silent corridors and damning the ship and the voyage and every stinking human aboard her. Then he found a bar and drank himself blind.

"I admire your courage," said William Johnson, "but I must admit your discretion leaves something to be desired. You should have known you had no chance against a professional politician."

"Now he tells me," said Friday ruefully.

"I hope it hasn't made things—difficult for you, Evan." There was an anxiety in Elena's voice which pleased him.

He shrugged. "I didn't lose too many friends. But I lost a lot of standing."

Oddly enough, his mind ran on, it had been Sam Carter who had defended him most stoutly in the barrack-room arguments, Sam who had beaten him up when he first arrived and now stood by him, though it meant damning Wilson. The fact was comforting, but puzzling. It was hard to realize that people just didn't fit into the next categories of tradition.

They were sitting in the Johnsons' apartment, a small bright place where he had been a frequent guest of late. He had fallen into the habit of dropping in almost “daily,” for the merchant class had something to offer he had never looked to find on the lower levels, and something, besides, which was strange to the topdecks. The Johnsons and their associates were not the narrow-souled tradesmen their reputation among other classes insisted; they were, on the whole, people of quality and some little culture. If they had a major fault, he thought, it was a certain conservatism and timidity, a nostalgia for the “good old days” with which he could only partly sympathize. And they had their own tired cliches, meaningless words setting off automatic emotional responses—“free enterprise,” “progressivism,” “Radical”—but then, what class didn’t?

He found himself increasingly aware of Elena. She was pleasant to look at and talk to; the other lower-deck women had seemed meretricious or merely dull. And at the same time she had an enterprising sincerity and an, at times, startlingly realistic world-view which would be hard to find in officers’ women.

“And what do you expect to happen next?” asked Mrs. Johnson. The fact of Friday’s being from topdeck earned him an automatic respect among Guildsmen, who still wanted leaders. Their own agitation was simply for justice to themselves, and Friday had to admit their cause seemed reasonable.

“Trouble. Open fighting—there’ve been brawls almost every watch between the goons of the Brotherhood and those of the officers. Maybe mutiny.”

Johnson shuddered. He was bold enough in conversation, but physically timid. “I know,” he said. “And the laborers have been making difficulties for private shopowners too. They’ve been smashing up bars, especially, when they’re drunk.”

"Want to socialize liquor, eh?" Elena's laugh was strangely merry. "Maybe we should call for a representative of the tavern-keepers on the Council."

"Only a representative of all tradesmen," said Johnson stiffly. To Friday: "We won't stand for it much longer. The younger Guildsmen are forming protective associations."

"Goons! Certainly *not!* Protect—"

"A goon by any other name would smell as sweet," said Elena. "Why not call them by their right name? If we have to fight, we'll need fighting units."

"Not much good without weapons and training," said Friday. "You have small machine shops here and there. You should start quietly making knives, knuckledusters, and so on, and exercise squads in their use. Wouldn't take long to equip every man."

"Why, you're speaking sedition!" whispered Johnson. "That's no better than Wilson."

Friday flung out of his chair and paced the floor. "Why not?" he said angrily, "it's not as if you meant aggression. The police can't be everywhere, and in any case they're under the control of whoever owns the Captain. At the moment, that happens to be an uneasy cabal of Engy and Astro officers, together with Wilson, who's nominally their associate and actually trying to get the power from them. If the officers win, you may expect to see a rigid caste system imposed on all the ship. If Wilson wins, you'll get a nominal communism which, if I've read any history at all, will rapidly become the same kind of dictatorship under different labels. Either way, the Guilds lose. You won't have a voice in affairs till you're strong enough to merit one."

"Evan, I thought you were an officer," said Elena, very softly. "I thought even now—"

"Of course I am! A ship has to have discipline and a hierarchy of authority, but that's precisely what we haven't got now. What I want to see is a strong captain with an officer corps made of the better existing elements—oh, such as my father, for instance, or Lieutenant Steinberg, or any of some hundred others. Most of the lower-echelon officers are decent and sincere men, Elena, they just haven't got any effective voice in affairs; they take orders from the Captain without regard to the fact that he takes *his* orders from two or three warring cliques. And the holes left in the corps could be filled competitively from the lower ranks."

"Ah—" Johnson cleared his throat shyly. "Pardon me, Evan, but wouldn't there be the same tendency as before, for rank to become hereditary?"

"Naturally, superior people tend to have superior children," said Friday somewhat snobbishly. "But today, I admit, while there is still competitive examination for promotion there is a certain favoritism in judging the results and few or no crewmen get the education needed to prepare for the tests." He clenched his fists. "God, what a lot of reform we need!"

Elena came over and took his hand. "You know more about the ship than anyone in the Guilds, Evan," she said. "Certainly your military knowledge is the best we can get. Will you be with us?"

He looked at her for a long while, "What have I been saying?" he whispered. "What have I been saying?"

"Good things, Evan."

"But—Bill, you're right. I have been talking violence." He smiled uncertainly. "I've been overworking my mouth lately, haven't I?"

"You won't help us—?"

"I don't know. God, I don't know! Taking the law into our own hands this way—it's contrary to the articles, it's contrary to everything I've ever believed."

"But we have to do it, Evan," she said urgently. "You advised it yourself, and you're right."

"Blast it, I'm still an Engy. I still have to live with my co-workers."

"You could quit your job and come live with us. The Guilds would pay you a good wage just to get their protective squads organized."

"So now I'm to become a paid goon!" he said bitterly.

"The time may come when the ship will need your goon squads."

"I don't know," he said dully. With sudden vehemence: "Let me think! I've been kicked into a level I don't understand, caught up in a business I don't approve. My father told me, before they sent me away, that I was still an officer. And yet—let me think it over, will you?"

"Of course, Evan," said Johnson.

He bade clumsy farewells and went out into the corridor and back toward his dwelling place, too preoccupied to notice the men who fell quietly in on either side of him. When one of them spoke, it was like a blow:

"This way, Friday."

"Eh? Huh?" He stared at them. Wilson's goons. "What the hell do you want?"

"We just want to take you to Mr. Wilson, jo. He wants to see you. This way."

An elevator took them up to officer level Actually, thought a dim corner of Friday's mind, the term should have been "down," since they were increasing centrifugal “gravity”; but the notion of the upper classes living “upward” was too ingrained for usage to change, even though on any one level “down” meant the direction of acceleration. Silly business.

The whole expedition was a cosmic joke.

He had not been in this territory for half a year, and it jarred him with remembrance. He stayed between his escorts, looking directly ahead, trying not to see the familiar people who went by. It was doubtful if any of them looked closely enough to recognize him.

Wilson’s offices occupied a suite in the Administrative section, near the bows and just under the ship’s skin. Her screens made that area as safe as any other, and the fact that the pilot room and hence the captain’s quarters had to be directly in the bow on the axis of rotation—the only spot where there was an outside view except via telescreen—had dictated the placement of all officer areas nearby.

The inner office was a big one. Wilson had had it redecorated with murals which, in spite of their subjects—heroic laboring figures, for the most part—Friday had to admit were good. Indeed, these troubled decades had produced a lot of fine work.

He wrenched his attention to the man behind the great desk. Wilson sat easy and relaxed, puffing a king-sized cigar and studying some papers which he put aside when the newcomers entered. He rose courteously and smiled. “Please sit down, Mr. Friday,” he said.

The two goons took up motionless posts by the door. Friday edged himself nervously into a chair.

“You know Lieutenant Farrell, of course,” said Wilson.

Friday felt a shock at seeing the lean middle-aged man in officer’s uniform seated at Wilson’s right. Farrell—certainly he knew Farrell, the man had taught him basic science. Farrell had for years been a general assistant to Captain Gomez.

"I'm sorry to see you associated with this man, sir," he said numbly.

"Quite a few officers are," said Farrell gently. "After all, Mr. Wilson is a Councillor."

"Have a cigar, Mr. Friday," said Wilson.

"No, thanks. What did you want to see me about?"

"Oh—several things. I wanted to apologize for the somewhat unfortunate result of the union meeting. You had a right to be heard, and it is a shame that some of the men got a little rowdy."

You know damn well what made them that way, thought Friday.

"I liked your courage, even if it was misguided," said Wilson. "You're an able young man and honest. I'd like to have you on my side."

Friday wished he had accepted the cigar. It would have been a cover for the silence that came from having no retort to make. *Another little political trick. I'll know better next time, if there is a next time.*

"You seem to think I'm some kind of monster," said Wilson. "Believe me, I have only the interests of the ship at heart. I think that we must be united in order to succeed in this voyage. But to achieve that union, we must have justice. You yourself, as a victim of the present system, ought to realize that."

"We need leadership first," said Friday slowly. "Good leadership, not political dictatorship."

"There is no intention of setting one up," said Farrell mildly. "Certainly you don't think that officers will be replaced by commissars! Would I be in this movement if that were the case? No, we simply want to replace the corrupt and the incompetent, and to install a socio-economic system adapted to the peculiar needs of the expedition."

"Nice words. But you're building up a private army, and you're planning mutiny."

"I could get angry at that charge," said Wilson. "Have I ever so much as suggested replacing the Captain? If the ship's articles are to be amended, it will be by due process of law."

"A rigged Council and a fixed election! Sure! Keep the Captain in his present job of figurehead!"

"Now it is you who are seditious. Look, Mr. Friday. I do believe you are innocent of the charges made against you, and I'd like to see you cleared and your rank restored. Promotion will be rapid for competent men, once things are running properly again. But these are tough times, and you can't expect me to take all that trouble for an enemy."

"So now you're trying to bribe me. Why, for all I know it was you who framed me in the first place."

Wilson's carefully learned manners dropped from him. It was a plain Engy who spoke, with more than a trace of anger: "Look, jo, d'you think you're so goddam important that it makes any difference what happens to you? You think I need you? I'm just trying to be fair, and give you a chance to get back where you were. You can be useful, sure, but you're not fixed to do any harm. Especially if you got fired from your job."

Friday stood up. "That's enough," he said. "Good-bye, Mr. Wilson."

"Have it your way, jo. If you change your mind, you can come back in a day or two. But don't be any later."

"I wish you would think it over," said Farrell.

"Good-bye!" Friday stormed out of the office.

He cooled off on the trip back. Gods, talk about burning bridges! He didn't belong anywhere now.

No—wait—the Guilds. He still didn't much like the thought of espousing their cause—but where else in all the universe could he go?

He took a certain malicious pleasure in telling off his boss when he quit. Then he drew his time, collected his few belongings, and went back to William Johnson's home.

The food trust was overthrown largely from within—a general strike of its underpaid workers, accompanied by violence—but that overthrow was instigated by leading Engineers as a means of overcoming their food-producing rivals. The Engineers wanted a return to the small private farms of the first years—*divide et impera*—but the upper ranks of Administration favored socializing the producing, packing, and distributing establishments, since they would then be under effective control of the small but efficient Admy bureaucracy. After a good deal of intriguing, socialism won, and the Engineers found themselves faced with a new rival as powerful as the old.

Two years later, Captain Petrie died. Both Engineering and Administration nominated a hand-picked successor, ignoring the rule that the first mate should take the office. This was a young man, Juan Gomez, associated with the Astrogation Department. Astro, being a small and exclusively officer group, lacked the strength and support of the contending overlords; but it had the law on its side, together with a surprising adroitness at playing its enemies off against each other. Gomez was named.

For a few years there was relative quiet, except for clashes between various bully gangs hired by the overlords. The workers, green and gray, were increasingly restless, the younger generation of officers in all departments ever more arrogant and exclusive. In the forty-fifth year of the great voyage, open warfare broke out between the private forces of Engy and Admy over the exact extent of Admy jurisdiction—the latter had been using the ship's internal law, which it was supposed to administer, as a means of aggrandizing its leaders. It was not what Earth's bloody history would have considered a real war—the two sides lacked very effective weapons, and were small—but people were getting killed, property was damaged and vital services suspended. Astrogation rallied the police and neutral groups to suppress the fighting. The ship's articles were amended, the most important respect being the transfer of police power from Administration to the Captaincy—in effect, to Astro. Administration didn't like it, but the Engineers, on the old half-a-loaf principle, supported the measure. Astro began building up followers, money investments, and political connections.

Five years later the lower Engineering ranks, having failed to obtain satisfaction in any other way, resorted to violence. The revolt was suppressed, but concessions were made in a Captain's Court which few officers liked.

Six years after that, Duncan, chief of Administration, attempted to seize the Captaincy in a coup d'etat which was defeated with the help of the Engineering bosses. Duncan and his immediate followers suffered the usual penalties of mutiny, but his power was left unbroken and passed to his successor. This was shown to be the work of Astro: in the sixty-first year, Admy and Astro together swung enough political power to break up officer ownership of factories and socialize them, and enough fighting strength to enforce the decree.

Some fifteen years passed without too much trouble as the ship adjusted to the new order of things. All important facilities were now under ship ownership and control, tracing back ultimately to the Captain and his Council. The old departmental divisions remained, but officers within them acted as individuals and their combinations were often across such party lines. Some wanted a return to the former state of affairs, but most were content to intrigue for control of this or that department of ship life—ultimately, the goal was to run the Council, from which all authority stemmed. A combine made up largely of Astro officers held the balance of power, but it was a constant battle of wits to maintain it. In this period began the first great out-burst of characteristic ship forms of art, literature, and music, new departures which would have meant little to an Earthman but which answered a need born of space and loneliness and the great overriding purpose. In science, some first-rate work was done on deep-space astrophysics and the biological effects of cosmic radiation.

Meanwhile, however, the laboring classes demanded some voice in affairs. Unions were organized on a ship-wide basis and finally joined together in Wilson's Brotherhood. At this time, too, the remaining independents—craftsmen, artisans, tailors, tavern-keepers, personal-service people, private lawyers, and their kind, including no few scientists and artists of one sort or another—began organizing the Guilds for mutual protection and advancement; but they had no way to win an effective voice.

Labor, however, could and did act. The great strike of 2201 broke the time of peace. On the principle that certain services were essential to the lives of everyone, the Council tried to break the strike, and for several days a running war was fought up and down the corridors of the ship. The union was finally suppressed, but it won what amounted to a victory, a representative on the Council. The old-line officers were outraged, but Wilson set to work at once making alliances with the younger and more liberal ones.

His official program was frankly communistic. The large fortunes and followings of the highest officers were to be broken up, all property except the purely personal was to belong to the ship, plants were to be governed by workers' councils. On the other hand, some kind of supreme hierarchy would still, obviously, be needed; and no doubt many of the ranking men who joined Wilson's cause were animated by the thought of promotion. There were also a certain percentage of sincere idealists who were disgusted with the intriguing and corruption of the ship government, the unseemly brawling, private gangs, and the not yet overcome unfairness of a caste system.

Besides Wilson's group, there were several others in high places, with schemes of their own. Certain men wanted to grab supreme power for themselves; others wished a return to this or that stage of previous ship's history say the good old days when the Engineer virtually ran affairs, or to advance along certain lines that seemed desirable to them—such as, for instance, a frankly hereditary officer caste controlling all wealth and authority.

Gomez still had the chairmanship of the Council, the small but strong police force, and a solid following among conservative elements including the bulk of the officer's corps and perhaps even a majority of the common. And Astro had the Captain. One suspected that McMurtrie, chief of that department, had the final say in matters, though no one outside of Astro knew for certain.

Only—how long could it continue? The ship was ready for another explosion. How long before it came?

Gods! thought Friday sick. *Gods, what a history! What hell's broth of a history!*

He had about three weeks before the crisis broke, and had not thought he could go so long on as little sleep as he got.

There was first the matter of raising his troop. A call for volunteers at a special Guild meeting brought disappointing results. He and a few others had to go on personal recruiting tours, arguing and propagandizing and even applying certain subtle threats—social disapproval, boycotting, and whatever else could be hinted at obliquely enough not to antagonize. Some rather slippery sophistry got by at times, and Friday had to be careful to suppress his own uneasy doubts about his cause. The motto was always organization for defense, formation of a band which could help the regular police if they should need it, and he found it necessary to shout down the hotheads who had been his eagerest followers, He often had occasion to remember the ancient maxim that politics is the art of creating an equality of dissatisfaction.

He was helped by events. As the watches went by, disorder grew like a prairie fire. Hardly a "day" passed that the police were not called to stop a brawl between Wilson's gangs and the goons of other factions, or to halt the wrecking and plundering of some shop. They were bewildered and angry men who came to Friday, they wanted to fight somebody—it didn't much matter who.

"But what the glory is Wilson doing it for?" said Mrs. Johnson. "He's only hurting his own cause. He should be calming them down, or he'll turn all the ship against his people."

"That," said Friday with a bleak new insight, "is what he wants."

Officially, of course, the Councillor deplored such lawlessness and called on a workers to desist. But his language was weak; it only turned strong when he cited the grievances which had driven them to such measures. Friday buckled down to training his gang.

He had no military knowledge except vague impressions from books, but then neither did anyone else who mattered. Only the police were allowed firearms, and his conditioning was too deep for him to consider manufacturing them. It would hardly have been practicable anyway. But the tools of the artisan could make the nasty implements of infighting. And it occurred to him further that pike axes, and even short swords were valuable under ship conditions. However clumsily wielded, they were still formidable. He thought of bows too, but experiment showed him that more practice would be needed than his men had time or patience for.

He worked three shifts each day, drilling those who could attend any one of them. Practice with weapons, practice in working a groups, practice at rough-and-tumble—it was all he could do, and he more than half expected his motley squads to break and run if it ever came to action. He had about two hundred all told, shopkeepers, artisans, personal-service men, office workers, intellectuals of all stripes; a soldier's nightmare.

But after all, he consoled himself, it wasn't really an army he was trying to organize. It as an association of ordinary peaceable men who had found it necessary to form their own auxiliary police force. That was all. He hoped to heaven that was all.

They used an empty storage space near zero-gravity as their armory. You could do weird and wonderful things at low-weight, once you got the hang of it. He tried to be as unobtrusive about his project as possible, and specially to keep secret the fact of his most lethal innovations. The police would most likely confiscate things like those, if they heard of them. All the rest of the ship needed to know was that the Guildsmen had started a protective association, and if the Brotherhood wanted to make a huge joke of it, so much the better.

Nevertheless, Friday was irrationally pleased when a few of his men got into a fight with some greens in a bar and beat the devil out of them.

He was catching an exhausted nap in Johnson's apartment when Elena woke him with he news that the Brotherhood had mutinied.

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed. Sleep drained from him like water from a broken cup as he got to his feet.

"Yes," she said tonelessly. "The intercom just announced a state of emergency, told all crewfolk to get home and stay there and not take part in any violence on pain of being considered mutineers—what else can it mean?"

He heard the brazen voice again, roaring out of the corridor loudspeaker, and nodded. "But I'd like to see it done," he said thinly. "The ship is six miles long and two miles in diameter. How does Wilson expect to take over with a thousand men at best?"

"Seize the key points and the officers," she flared. "How else?"

"But the police—he can't hold anyplace against men with gas guns, fire-arm grenades—"

"He must think he can! Are we going to sit here and do nothing?"

"Not much else we can do. That order to stay inside means us, too."

"Evan Friday, what have you been organizing the Guildsmen for?"

"Get on the visiphone," he said. "Call up everyone before somebody or other cuts off our communications. Tell them to stand by. But we can't go rushing out blindly."

She flushed him a smile. “That’s more like it, Evan!”

He looked out the door into the hall. Men, women, children, were running each way, shouting, witless with panic—*This is revolution,* he thought. *You don’t know what’s happened, you don’t know who’s fighting or where the fighting is, you sit and wait an listen to the people going they don’t know where.*

Presently Elena came to sit on the arm of his chair. “Where’s father and mother?” she asked, and he saw the hard-held strength of her breaking as immediate pressure lifted. “They said they were going to visit Halvorson’s; where are they—”

“I don’t know,” he bit out. “They must have taken refuge with someone. We’ll just have to wait here.”

“I couldn’t raise everybody,” she said. “A lot of lines were jammed. But some of them said they’d pass the word along by messengers.”

“Good! Good folk!” It was enormously heartening to know that some had remained brave and level-headed.

“I didn’t even try to call headquarters,” she said wryly. “But maybe we could offer the Captain our help.”

“Let’s see what happens first.” Friday pounded his knee with a white-knuckled fist. “It’s not that I’m scared to fight, Elena. In fact, I’m scared green to sit here and not fight. But we’d just blunder around, have no idea of where to go or what to do, probably get in the way of the police—”

The lights went out.

They sat for a moment in a blackness which was tangible. Elena choked a cry, and he heard the screaming of women out in the hall.

"Power cut off," he said unnecessarily, trying to hold his voice steady. "Wait—hold still a minute." He strained his ears into the darkness and could not hear the mute endless hum of the ventilators. "Yeah. Dead off."

"Oh, Evan—if they hold the converters, they can threaten to destroy them—"

"Take more than they've got to do that, darling." The word came unconsciously, unnoticed by either of them. "But if they can hold off for a long enough time, they can make things awfully tough for the rest of the ship."

"It's—been tried before, hasn't it—?"

"Uh-huh, during the great strike. The police took the converters without difficulty and operated them till the trouble was over. So—if Wilson's tried it again, he must think he can hold the engine section against attack. Or maybe—maybe he doesn't expect an attack at all—"

"You mean the police are in his pay—no!"

"I don't know what I mean." Friday groped to his feet, and his only emotion was a rising chill of anger. "But it's time we found out. I'm going to get the men together."

They located a flashlight and went down the corridors toward the armory. It was utterly black save where their own beam wavered, a smothering blackness in which Friday thought he could hardly breathe. That was nonsense; the air wouldn't get foul for hours yet; but his heartbeat was frantic in his ears. People had retreated, the halls were almost empty—now and then another glow would bob out of the tunnel before them, a weirdly highlighted face. The elevators were dead; they used ringingly echoing companionways, down and down and down into the guts of the ship.

Silent ship, darkened ship; it was as if she were already dead, as if he and Elena were the last life aboard her, the last life in all the great hollow night between Sol and Centauri. Elena sobbed with relief when they came to the armory.

Friday had maintained a rotating watch there, sentries who challenged him in voices gone shrill with fear. Others were arriving, men and their families, the agreement being that in emergency this would be the rallying place. It was easily defensible, especially with the weapons stockpiled there.

Flashlights danced in the gloom, picking out faces and shimmering off metal, and the great sliding shadows flowed noiselessly around the thin beams. Friday shouted till the walls rang; calling the folk around him, seeking to allay the rising tide of hysteria.

“As soon as enough of us are here,” he said, “we’ll go out and see what we can do.”

“The hell you say!” exploded a voice from the murk. “We’ll stay here where we can defend ourselves!”

“Till the oxygen and the heat are gone? Would you rather choke and freeze?”

“They’ll reach some agreement before then. Wilson can’t let the whole ship die.”

“They’ll reach Wilson’s kind of agreement, if any. Something’s happened so the police can’t protect us any more. We’ll have to act for ourselves.”

“Go out and get killed in the dark? Not I, Mister!”

Friday had to resort to all the tactics of demagoguery—*he was getting good at it,* he thought—before the recalcitrants could be brought around.

The agreement finally was that some men should stay to guard the women and children, while the rest would go out and—

And what? Friday did not dare admit that he had no idea. What, in all those miles of lightless tunnels and cave-like rooms, could they do?

There was an altercation at one of the doors. Friday went over to it and found a pair of pikemen thrusting back a shadowy and protesting group of men.

“Bunch of goddam workers want in,” explained one or the guards.

Friday shone his torch into the vague mass and picked out the battered red face of Carter. “Sam! What the hell—”

“Fine way to treat us. We only want to join your bunch, Doc.”

“Huh? I thought you were a Brotherhood man!”

“Yeah, but not a mutineer. I didn’t think Old Tom’d ever try anything like this—just thought we’d roughhouse it a bit with the topdeck goons and holler for our rights. By God, Doc, his men got guns!”

“What?”

“Fact. Ain’t too careful about using them, either. Me and some others that hadn’t joined the goons were given a last chance to do it or get brigged—a goon squad come into the barracks and told us. But we got the jump on ’em, and here’s my proof.” The light glimmered off the pistol in Carter’s fist. “We had a running fight to get down to low-weight, but others joined us on the way—some o’ the boys who’d signed on as goons but didn’t see mutiny, and others from here and there. They’ve took over the engine-section, Doc, and the gyros and the farms. There’s men here with me who was on duty when the goons came in and kicked ’em out. Some of ’em had buddies who got shot for not moving fast enough. We wanna fight with you now, Doc!”

Numbly, Friday waved his sentries aside and let the workers file in. Gray and green, burly men with smoldering eyes, perhaps two score all told—a welcome addition, yes, but they were the heralds of evil tidings.

He let his watch sweep out another hour of darkness and restlessness and slowly rising temperature. Without regulation, the room was filled with animal heat of its occupants, the air was hot and foul. Later would come the cold.

Others straggled in, one by one or in small groups, Guildsmen and some more of the laboring class. But there was no further news, and presently the influx ceased. It was time to strike out.

A count-off showed that he had a little over a hundred men ready to go. Go—where?

He decided to head for the upper levels There should be his best chance of getting information—there, too, was the nerve center of the ship. If Wilson held her heart and lungs, her brain might still be accessible.

They went out, a hundred men armed with hand weapons of the oldest sort and a few scattered guns, daunted by the night and their loneliness. Silently, save for heavy breathing, they streamed down the corridors and along the companionways, only an occasional short flash of light revealing them. Friday drew on his memory of the ship's plan, which every cadet was required to learn, to guide them well away from the key points which Wilson held. He didn't want more fighting than he could avoid.

The ship was dark and still. Someone whimpered, behind him, a little animal sound of fear.

They wound up the levels, feeling their bodies grow heavier, feeling the sweat or their skins and the bitter taste of panic in their mouths. Once in awhile someone ran before them, sandaled feet slapping down the tunnel and fading back into the thick silence.

"God," whispered Carter. "What's happened to the ship?"

His voice was shaken, and Friday realized that the same despair was rising in him. It wouldn't take many hours of night and stillness and creeping chill before everyone aboard capitulated, before the entire crew would be ready to assail anyone that still tried to resist. "Come on!" he said harshly.

They were in the upper levels when a flash gleamed far down the hall, someone nearing. Friday heard the sigh of tension behind him. If this was a mutineer gang and—

"Who goes?" The cry wavered in the dark. "Who is it?"

"Put up your hands," shouted Friday. The echoes ran down the length of the corridor, jeering at him.

"Come close."

It was a single man in Astro uniform. Friiday recognized him—Ensign Vassily, secretary to Farrell. Farrell!

The gun was heavy in his fist. "What do you want?"

"Friday—Friday—" It was a sob. The flashbeam glistened off sweat and tears. "God, man, you're here! We've been looking—"

"Looking! What for? Aren't you with Wilson too?"

"Not now. The mutiny's got out of hand. Wilson has the police trapped, Farrell can't leave—he managed to send a few of us out, he knew of your gang—Friday, it's up to you, you've got to save the ship!"

"Out of hand—What the devil are you talking about?"

"Wilson was too smart." The boy's breath sobbed in his throat. "He didn't let any of his top chiefs in on his plans till it was too late. He—he started a riot down in Park Four, a big riot that brought out all the police force. Then his men—he'd gotten some firearms from a police officer that was with him, we didn't know he had anyone in the police—His men came with machine guns and flame throwers. They've got the force bottled up in the park—and meanwhile they've taken over the rest of the ship!"

So that was it, thought Friday. Simple! You lured all your enemies into one of the park sections and then mounted guard over the half-dozen exits. A few men with weapons and gas masks could keep a thousand besieged until cold and darkness and choking air forced them to surrender.

"Where do *you* fit in?" He shook Vassily till the teeth rattled in the ensign's jaws. "What do you mean, the mutiny's out of hand? Did you engineer it yourself?"

"Farrell—the Captain—I do not know, Friday, so help me God I don't know what it's all about!"

With a sudden terrible conviction: "Gomez and Farrell framed me, didn't they? They had me broken down to crewman!" When Vassily remained still, Friday cracked the pistol barrel against his head. "That's right, isn't it?"

"Uh—yes, no, I don't know—Friday, you've got to help us! We've been searching the ship for you, running down all the corridors with Wilson's men ready to shoot, you're the last one who can help!"

"Help?" Carter's laugh was bitter. "Spears and axes against guns?"

"Most of Wilson's men don't have guns. He d-d-doesn't want 'em to get out of hand, I guess. Just the ones holding in the police, and holding the k-key points—"

Friday's mind began turning over with an abnormal speed and sureness. There wasn't time to be afraid, not now, not when all the ship was darkened. "That means the rest of the ship's weapons are still in the arsenal," he said rapidly. "I suppose Wilson's mounted guard over them?"

"I—I s-s-suppose so—"

Friday's memories riffled through the plans of the ship. The police quarters were near the bows, with the arsenal behind them, just under the ship's skin. Beyond that lay a boat blister, whose airlock offered an emergency exit—or entrance. Wilson's guards would be inside the ship, though, in front of the doors leading into the police area. He hoped!

There were other blisters along the length of the ship, holding the boats which would and when the *Pioneer* had taken up an orbit around a planet. And there were spacesuits stored at each one.

"This way!" he said.

It was strange walking on the outside. Eyes accustomed to a narrowness of walls swam with vertigo in naked space. Centrifugal force threw blood into the head, the heart began to beat wildly and the body refused to believe that it was not hanging downward. You had to be careful how you stepped —if both magnetic shoes were off the hull at once, you would be thrown into space, you could go spinning out and out forever into the dark between the stars.

Above your feet was the mighty curve of the ship, dimly gleaming metal tilted at a crazy angle against the sky, elliptical horizon enclosing all the life in more than a lightyear of emptiness. It rang faintly under human footfalls, and the suit was thick with your heartbeat and breathing, but over that lay the elemental silence. It was a silence which sucked and smothered, the stupendous quiet of vacuum reaching farther than a man could think, and the tiny noises of life were unnaturally loud against it.

Below was the turning sky, the constellations wheeling in fire and ice against a savage blackness, the chill glory of the Milky Way and the far green gleam of nebulae, hugeness, loneliness, and terror. The raw cold grandeur was like frost along the nerves; men felt sick and dizzy with the streaming of the stars.

Faint light glimmered off spacesuits and weapons as the troop made its slow way over the hull. About half the band had come out through four exits, and they clustered together for comfort against the hollow dark. Few words were spoken, but the harsh rasp of their breathing rattled in the helmet radios.

As they approached the bows, Friday could pick out the stabbing brilliance of Alpha Centauri—but Sol was lost somewhere in the thronging stars, nearly three lightyears away. He found it hard to believe that the ship was rushing through space at fantastic velocity—no, it was motionless, it was lost forever between the stars.

And in the face of that immensity and that mission, he thought bitterly, men had nothing better to do than fight each other. With all the universe around them, they could not unite in a society which did not tear itself apart.

There was a certain cruel symbolism in the fact that it was Astrogation which had betrayed him—the men who steered between the worlds, dealing in rottenness and death. But after all, what else did those officers have to do? There were no planets between the suns, no orbital corrections to make—the department existed to keep alive the techniques and, meanwhile, to hold various posts connected with the general maintenance of the ship. And to stir up against each other men who should have been comrades—to break the innocent with lies, to provoke mutiny by injustice and intrigue, to infiltrate the revolts they themselves had created and control them for some senseless unknown purpose.

His jaws hurt with the clenching of his teeth. There was work to be done: enter the arsenal from outside, get the weapons, overcome the guards, then go on to park and fall on Wilson's men from behind so that the police could get out. Afterward it would be to clean up the rest of the mutineers; most likely they'd surrender at once when the police moved against them.

But after that—after that—!

Evan Friday walked slowly toward the door. It was strange to be back topside. After the noise and fury and belly-knotting terror of battle, after the lights had gone on again and folk had returned shakenly to resume life—of necessity, there had been amnesty for all rebels, save the ringleaders—after the quite undeserved but pleasant adulation of gray and green and, Guild, there had been a polite note, requesting his attendance on the Captain, and he had donned his shabby best and gone. And that was all there was to it.

He felt no special emotion, it was drained from him and only a great quiet steadiness of purpose was left. It. was no use hating anyone, they were all together in the ship and the ship was alone between the stars. But there were certain words he had to say.

The policeman at the door saluted him. "This way, please, sir," he said.

So now it's "sir" again. Do they think that can, bribe me?

They went down a short hall and through an anteroom. The clerks looked up from their work with a vague apprehensiveness. Friday nodded to a man he had known a half a year ago—half a lifetime!—and at his escort's gesture went alone through the inner door.

There were three men sitting at the great table, in the Captain's office—frail white-haired Gomez, lean gray Farrell, stocky dark McMurtrie: They rose as he entered, and he stood with straining military stiffness. He couldn't help feeling naked without his uniform.

"How do you do, Ensign Friday." Gomez' old voice was hardly above a whisper. "Please be seated."

He found a chair and watched them out of cold eyes. "You are mistaken, sir," he answered. "I have no rank."

"Yes, you do, or rather you will as soon as that miscarriage of justice has been taken are of."

"Let us be plain with each other," said Friday flatly. "I know that you are responsible for my conviction. I also know that you and your associates engineered the mutiny, and that Wilson was only a force of which you made use. The casualties of the whole affair were some thirty killed and fifty wounded. If you had not summoned me here I would have come myself to charge you with murder."

There was pain in Gomez' slow reply: "And you would be perfectly justified. But perhaps the charge should be modified to manslaughter. We did not intend that there should be any death, and it weighs more heavily on us than you can imagine. But as you also know, the business got out of control, Wilson succeeded far beyond our expectations, and only your timely intervention saved us. Fortunately, the plan does not call for putting the ship into such danger again."

“I should hope not!” snapped Friday. “Before you go any further, perhaps I had better say that I left the traditional sealed envelope containing all I know with a friend. If I don’t return soon, you may look for an unplanned uprising.”

“Oh, you are in no danger,” smiled Farrell. “It would hardly do for us to assault the next Captain.”

“I—you—*what?*”

Numbly, Friday heard the voice continue. “In about five years, I imagine, you will ready to succeed Captain Gomez.”

He forced steadiness back, and there was a new anger in his reply: “Don’t you think you can buy me that way, or any other. The whole structure of ship society is wrong. Our history has been one succession of bungling injustices, and catastrophes. I am here to call for a complete overhauling. And the first item will be to clean out the rotten blood-suckers who claim to be the leaders.”

“Please, Mr. Friday,” said McMurtrie, a little irritably. “Spare the emotional language till you’ve heard a bit more. For your information, every major wrong this expedition suffered has been created deliberately by the leaders—because they’ve really had no choice in the matter.”

Friday glared at him. “You should know!” he spat. “You’ve run the whole dirty show, for twenty years this doddering fool has been your puppet, and —”

“I have not. The story goes, yes, that I am the power behind the throne. It’s true that I’ve worked hard to keep things going. And I took the blame, because the Captain cannot afford it. He must have, if not the respect, at least the grudging acquiescence of the ship. But Captain Gomez is a very strong and skillful gentleman, and the decisive voice has always been his."

Friday shook his head. The maze of plot and counterplot, blinds and red herrings and interwoven cabals, was getting to be too much lor him. "Why?" he asked dully. "What's the reason been? This is the greatest adventure man has ever faced, and now you say you've deliberately perverted it. If you aren't fiends and aren't madmen—*why?*"

"Let me start from the beginning," said Gomez. He leaned back in his chair and half closed his eyes. "Psychology is a highly developed science these days," he said gently, "though for reasons which will become obvious it has been largely suppressed aboard ship. A potential leader is quietly given some years of intensive training in the field, for use later on—as you will be given it. And among the thousands of men who worked ten or twenty years on Earth planning this voyage, there were many psychologists. They could fore-see events with more precision than I can convey to you; but I hope my bare words will be convincing.

"Consider the *Pioneer*. Once on her way, she is a self-contained world. Everything we can possibly need to keep alive and comfortable is built into her. There is no weather, no disease, no crop failure, no earthquake, no outside invader, no new land to cultivate—nothing! A world potentially changeless! To be sure, for some twenty years the crew was still working on internal construction, but then that source of occupation and challenge was gone and there were still a hundred years or more traveling left. A hundred years where a bare minimum of work would provide an excellent living for everyone.

"What is the crew going to do in those hundred years?"

For a moment Friday, was taken aback at the question. The imbecile simplicity and the monstrous blindness of it held him dumb before he could answer: “Do? Why, God, man, the things that we have been doing, the worthwhile things that got accomplished in spite of all that went wrong. Science, music, the arts—”

McMurtrie gave him a scornful look. “What percentage of the population can keep amused that way?” he asked.

“Why—uh—ten per cent, maybe—But the rest—What’s your psychology for, anyway? I’ve read books from Earth, I know there we primitive cultures where people were content to live perfectly uneventful, routine lives for thousands of years at a time. You could hay created such a culture within the ship.”

“And how fit would that culture be for the hardships and dangers of Alpha Centauri?” demanded Farrell.

“It’s a question of decadence,” said Gomez persuasively. “If you read your history, you’ll find that the decadent cultures, the ones, without hope or enterprise or anything but puerile experimentation hiding a rockbound conservatism, have been those which lacked some great external purpose. They’ve been easier to live in, yes. until the decadence went so far that disintegration set in. The cultures which offered a man something to live for besides his own petty self—a crusade, a discovery, a dream of any kind, perhaps only the prospect of new land for settlement—have usually been violent, intolerant, unpleasant in one way or another, simply because everything else has been subordinated to the great purpose. I submit, as examples, Periclean Athens, Renaissance Italy, Elizabethan England, and nineteenth-century America, and ask you to compare them with, say, Imperial Rome or eighteenth-century Europe. You will also note that the greatest works of art and intellect were done in some of the most turbulent eras. As far as I can determine, the, progress made aboard our ship has been rather because of than in spite of all our troubles."

"But damn it, man, we *have* a mission!" exploded Friday. "We're bound for far Centauri!"

"To be sure. That was the dream which sufficed the first generation. I don't say that unrest is a necessary component of non-decadence, in fact my whole argument has been grossly over-simplified. There was little strife in the beginning, because there was the great goal to dwarf men's petty differences."

"But what of the next generation, and the one after that, and the one after that, clear to Centauri? What was the goal to them but a vague thing in the background, an accepted part of everyday life—a thing which they would never see, or only see as very old people at best, a thing which had caused their lives to be spent in a cramped and sterile environment far from the green Earth? Don't you think there would have been a certain amount of subconscious resentment? And don't you think that the descendants of human stock deliberately chosen for energy initiative, and general ability would have looked around for something worthwhile to do? And if nothing else is available, personal aggrandizement is a perfectly worthwhile goal."

"Couldn't—" Friday hesitated. The whole fiendish argument had a shattering conviction about it, and yet it seemed wrong and cruel. "Couldn't there have been a static culture for the in-between generations, and a revival of the dynamic sort in the generation that will reach Centauri young?"

"Now you're wallowing in wishful thinking," said McMurtrie. "Cultures have momentum. They don't change themselves over night. Just tell me how you'd do all this, anyway."

Friday was silent.

"Believe me, all this was foreseen, and the solution adopted, while admittedly not very good, was the best available," said Farrell earnestly. "Conflict was inevitable. But if it could be controlled, properly directed, it could have great value, not only in keeping the dynamic society we will need at Centauri going, but also as a hard school for the unknown difficulties we will face then.

"Naturally, overt control is impossible. It has to be done indirectly—as far as possible, events simply have to take their natural course, with such men as know the secret and the techniques of psychology serving only as unnoticed guides.

"The initial setup was designed to cause a certain chain of development. The original small-scale private enterprises became monopolies in a very natural way, and their excesses provoked reactions, and so it has been throughout the history of the ship. Now and then things have gotten out of control, such as during the great strike, or the recent riots and mutiny, but, by and large the plan has progressed in its ordained path—the path which, believe it or not, in the long run has produced the *minimum* possible unrest and conflict.

"Some men have striven for their own selfish ends, money or power—Wilson was one. We need their type for the plan, we offer it chances to develop—and at the same time, through the ultimate annihilating defeat of such men, we need the type out of our society, More men have responded in desirable ways. They have demanded justice for themselves, or for their class, or even—like yourself—for classes not their own, for the ship as a whole. Thus is born the type we ultimately want, the hard-headed fighting visionaries."

"A hell of a way to get them," said Friday disconsolately.

"The trouble with young idealists," said Gomez dryly, "is that they expect all mankind to live up to their own impossibly high standards, When the human race obstinately keeps on being human, these young men, instead of revising their goals downward to something perhaps attainable, usually turn sour on their whole species. But man isn't such a bad race, Friday. Give him a little time to evolve.

"As for you, I'd had my eye on you for a long time. You were able, intelligent, stubborn in your notions of right and wrong—all good qualities for a skipper if I do say so myself! You needed to be kicked out of a certain snobbishness and to learn practical politics. I arranged for you to be thrown into a milieu demanding such a development. If you had failed, you'd have been exonerated in time and given some harmless sinecure. As it is you've responded so well that we think you're the best choice for the next Captain—the one who'll reach Centauri!"

Friday said nothing. There seemed nothing to say.

"You'll go back to lower decks for a while and lead the Guilds," resumed Gomez. "They have a good claim now for a voice on the Council, having saved the ship and discovered their own strength. They'll get it, after some difficulty and agitation. You'll be cleared of the charges against you and restored to officer class with a higher rank, but remain Guild spokesman. In the course of time, the Guilds will build up power and ultimately join with Astro to oust the other factions from an effective voice. No violence, if it can be helped, but a restoration of mercantile economy. By then you should have learned enough psychology, practical and theoretical, to take over the Captaincy from me—which will, among other things, allay the old and perfectly correct suspicion that Astro has been quietly running the whole show all these years.

“Without going into detail on every planned event, there will be conditions aboard which, while actually quite tolerable, will contain enough social evil of one sort or another to call forth the best efforts of all men of good will, whether they know the great secret or not. Yes, we’ll give them their causes to fight for! And in the end their striving will succeed; the just and harmonious order of this voyage’s beginnings will be restored.

“It will be difficult, yes, it will take most of your lifespan. But the job should be completed by the time the ship is within four or five years of her goal. Then a satisfied and united humanity can begin making ready for the next great adventure.”

His voice trailed off, and he looked down his desk with a blindness that spoke the continuing thought: *The adventure I will never see.*

“Are you game?” asked McMurtrie. “Do you want the job?”

“I—I’ll take it,” whispered Friday. “I’ll try.”

Gomez did not look up. It was as if he were seeing through the desk and the floor and the walls and corridors and hull, out to the loneliness between the stars.

TO OUTLIVE ETERNITY

-1-

Leonora Christine was in the tenth year of her journey when grief came upon her.

An outside watcher, quiescent with respect to the stars, might have seen the thing before she did; for at her speed she must need to run half blind. Even without better instrumental capabilities, he would have known of the disaster a few weeks ahead. But he would have had no way to cry his warning, and it could not have helped her.

And there was no watcher anyhow: only night, bestrewn with multitudinous cold points that were suns, the frosty cataract of the Milky Way and the rare phantom glimmer of a nebula or a sister galaxy. Nine lightyears from Sol, the ship was illimitably alone.

An automatic alarm roused Captain Telander. As he struggled upward from sleep, First Mate Lindgren's voice followed: *"Kors i Herrens namn!"* The horror in it jerked him fully awake. He didn't stop to use the intercom; he left his cabin and ran toward the command bridge. Nor would he have stopped to dress. They didn't trouble much with uniforms, and some of the people aboard were ceasing to trouble with clothes.

But as it happened, he was clad. Lulled by the sameness of nine and a half years—even in ship's time, more than one year—he had been reading a microtaped novel and had dozed off in his chair. And then the jaws of the universe snapped shut.

The corridor throbbed faintly around him, an endless pulse of driving energies. Ventilators gusted fresh air in his face, and it was subtly scented with clover. Murals hid metal and plastic with scenes of forest around a sunlit lake. The deck covering was green and springy as grass. But always the ship whispered and shivered, always one remembered the deeps outside.

Lars Telander flung himself up the companionway and into the bridge compartment. Ingrid Lindgren stood near the viewscope. It was not what counted; however massive and sophisticated, it was almost a toy. What truth could tell was in the instruments which glittered across the entire forward bulkhead. But her eyes would not leave it.

The captain brushed past her. The warning which had caused him to be summoned was still blazoned on a screen linked to the primary computer. He read. The breath sucked in between his teeth. As he stood, a slot opened with a click and extruded a printout. He snatched it. His gaze whipped across letters and figures. Quantification—decimal-point detail, after more data had come in and more calculation had been done—the basic Mene, Mene stood unchanged on the screen.

He stabbed the general alarm button, Sirens wailed; echoes went ringing down the corridors. On the intercom he ordered all hands not on duty to report to commons with the passengers. After a moment, harshly, he added that channels would be open so that those people standing watch could also get the news.

“But what are we going to do?” Lindgren cried.

“Very little, I fear.” The captain went to the viewscope. “Is anything visible in this?”

“Barely. I think. Fourth quadrant.” She clenched her fists and turned from him.

He took for granted that she meant the eyepiece for dead ahead and peered into that. At high magnification, space leaped at him. The scene was somewhat blurred and distorted. Optical circuits did not compensate perfectly for the aberration and Doppler effect experienced when one crowded the speed of light. But he saw starpoints, diamond, amethyst, ruby, topaz, emerald, a Fafnir’s hoard. Near the center burned the one called Beta Virginis, whither they were bound, thirty-three years after they said farewell to Earth. It should have looked very like the sun of home, but something of spectral shift remained to tinge it ice blue. And, yes, on the verge of human vision… that wisp? That smoky cloudlet, perhaps to wipe out this ship and these fifty human lives?

Noise broke in on his concentration, shouts, footfalls, the sounds of fear. He straightened: “I had better go aft,” he said without tone.

Lindgren moved to join him. “No, keep the bridge.”

“Why?” Her temper stretched thin and broke.

“Regulations?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “You have not yet been relieved.” A smile of sorts touched his lean face. “Unless you believe in God, regulations are now the only comfort we have.”

There was no space to spare in space. Every cubic centimeter inside the hull must work. But human beings intelligent and sensitive enough to adventure out here would have gone crazy without some room and privacy. Thus each of the twenty-five cabins could be divided into two cubicles if the pair who occupied it chose. And commons was more than a place for meals and meetings. The largest section was ball court and gymnasium. Offside rooms held tiny bowers, gardens, hobby shops, a swimming pool. Along one bulkhead stood three dream booths.

In this moment, however, none of these things had any more meaning than did drapes or murals or the bright casual clothes of the gathered people. They had not taken time to set out chairs. Everyone stood. Every eye locked onto Telander as he mounted the dais. Nobody stirred save to breathe, but sweat glistened on faces and could be smelled. The murmur of the ship seemed somehow to have grown louder.

The captain hesitated for a moment. They were from so many nations, those men and women—Europe, Asia, America, Africa, Luna. Of course they all knew Swedish; like every other extrasolar expedition, this one went in a Control Authority ship. But some did not know it well. For scientists, particularly, English and Russian remained the chief international tongues. Since Telander happened to be more at ease in the former, he sighed and fell back on it.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have just gotten grave news. Let me say immediately that our prospects of survival are not in the least hopeless, as far as can be judged from present data and computations. But we are in trouble. The risk was not unforeseen, but by its nature is one that cannot be provided against, at any rate in the present rather early stage of Bussard drive technology—”

“Get to the point, God damn it!” Telander couldn’t see who shouted out of the pack, but knew that voice: Williams, the short, cocky North American chemist.

“Quiet, you,” said Constable Reymont. Unlike most of them, who stood with male and female hands clutched together, he was alone, a little apart from the rest: a stocky, dark, hard-featured man with a scar seaming his brow. He wore a drab gray coverall and had pinned on his badge of authority.

“You can’t—” Someone must have nudged Williams, for he spluttered into silence.

Telander’s gaunt body shifted nervously from foot to foot. “Instruments have…have detected an obstacle. A small nebula. Extremely small, a mere clot of dust and gas, probably less than a thousand million kilometers across. It is traveling at an abnormal velocity. Perhaps it is the remnant of a larger thing cast out by a supernova, a remnant still held together by hydromagnetic forces. Or perhaps it is a proto-star. I do not know. The fact is, we are going to strike it. In about twenty-four hours, ship’s time. What will happen then, I do not know either. With luck, we can ride out the impact and not suffer serious damage. Otherwise…well, we knew this journey would have its hazards.”

He heard indrawn breaths, like his own on the bridge, and saw eyes go white-rimmed, mouths mutter, fingers trace signs in the air. Quickly, he went on: “We cannot do much to prepare. A little, ah, battening down, yes; but in general, the ship is as taut as possible already. When the moment approaches, most of you will be ordered into shock harness, and everyone will wear space armor. But—the meeting is now open for discussion.” Williams’s hand rocketed past the shoulder of tall M’Botu.

"Yes?"

One could imagine the red-faced indignation. "Sir! An unmanned probe did make the trip to Beta Virginis first, did it not? It did radio back an assurance that this route was free of danger. Did it not? Well, then, who is responsible for our blundering into this muck?"

Voices lifted toward a babble. "Quiet!" Charles Reymont called. He didn't speak loud, but he pushed the sound from his lungs in such a way that it struck home. Several resentful glances were cast at him, but the talkers came to order.

"I thought I had explained," Telander said. "The cloud is small, nonluminous, undetectable at any great distance. It has a high velocity. Thus, even if the robot carrier had taken our identical path, the nebulina would have been well offside at the time—more than fifty years ago, remember. Furthermore, we can be quite certain the robot did not go exactly as we are going. Quite apart from the relative motions of the stars, the distance between Sol and Beta Virginis is thirty-two lightyears. That is greater than our poor minds can picture. The slightest variation in the curves taken from star to star means a difference of many astronomical units in the middle."

"This thing couldn't have been foreseen," Reymont added. "The odds were against our running into it. But somebody has to draw the long odds now and then."

Telander stiffened. "I did not recognize you, Constable," he said.

Reymont flushed. "Captain, I was trying to expedite matters, so some clotbrains won't keep you there explaining the obvious till we smash."

"No insults to shipmates, Constable. And kindly wait to be recognized before you speak."

“I beg the captain’s pardon.” Reymont folded his arms and blanked his features.

Telander said with care: “Please do not be afraid to ask questions, however elementary they may seem. You are all supposed to be educated in the theory, at least, of interstellar cosmonautics. But I, whose profession this is, know how strange the paradoxes are, how hard to keep straight in one’s mind. Best if everyone understands, as well as may be, exactly what we face…Professor Glassgold?”

The molecular biologist lowered her hand and said timidly, almost too low to hear: “Can’t we—I mean—nebular objects like that, they are hard vacuums by ordinary standards. Aren’t they? And we, we are not only traveling just under the speed of light…we are gaining more speed every second. And so more mass. Our mass right now, as far as the rest of the universe is concerned, must be, well, several hundred thousand tons. Which is enormous for a spaceship, even this big a spaceship, isn’t it? So why can we not smash right on through? Why should we notice a bit of dust and gas?”

“A good point,” Telander said, “and if we are lucky, that is more or less what will happen. Not entirely, though. Remember, we *are* going unbelievably fast, so fast that we can actually use the hydrogen of space for fuel and exhaust. So if we run into a concentration of matter perhaps a hundred times as dense, at this speed, *ja,* we must hope that our forcefields can handle it, and the material components endure the stresses. Engineering extrapolations suggest we will not suffer grave damage. But those are mere extrapolations. There has been no chance as yet to test them. We are, after all, in a pioneering era…Dr. Iwamoto?”

“S-*s-sst!* I presume we have no possibility of avoidances? One day ship’s time is maybe one month cosmic time, so? We have not time to go around this nebu—nebulina?"

"No, I fear not. We perceive ourselves as accelerating at a steady five gravities. At least, our instruments do, if not our bodies." Telander paused. His mouth twisted. "Excuse me. I maunder. But I want to make certain that everyone is quite clear about the facts. In terms of the outside universe, our acceleration is not constant, but steadily decreasing. Therefore we cannot change course fast. Even a full vector normal to our velocity would not get us far enough aside before the encounter. Ah, Engineer Fedoroff?"

"Might it help if we decelerated? We must keep one or another mode operative at all times, to be sure, but I should think that deceleration now would soften the collision."

"The computer has not made any recommendations yet. Probably the information is insufficient. In any event, the difference would be slight, a few hundred kilometers per second, out of almost three hundred thousand. No, regardless of what we do, we have no choice except to—ah —"

"Bull through," Reymont murmured. Telander heard and cast him a look of annoyance. Reymont didn't seem to mind.

As discussion progressed, though he grew increasingly tense, his eyes flickered from one speaker to the next and the lines between lips and nostrils deepened in his face. When at last Telander said, "Dismissed," the constable pushed almost brutally through the uncertain milling of the rest and plucked the captain's sleeve.

"I think we had better hold a private talk, sir." His Swedish, like his English, was fluent, but marred by a choppy accent. He had been born and raised in the turbulent sublevels of Polyugorsk and somehow made his way to Mars (Telander was sure the means had been devious), where he fought with the Zebras during the troubles. Later he went homeward as far as Luna, joined the Rescue Corps and soon rose to colonel's rank. Telander knew Reymont had done much to organize the police branch of his service along more efficient lines than before, but nonetheless doubted the Authority's wisdom in offering him a berth on this expedition.

The captain said with a chill, "Now is hardly the time to deny anyone access to information, Constable."

"Oh, call our working by ourselves politeness, not to antagonize people," Reymont answered impatiently.

Telander shrugged. "Come with me to the bridge, then. I have no time for special conferences."

Williams and a couple of others seemed to feel differently, but Reymont drove them off with a glare and a bark. Telander must perforce smile a bit as he left the commons. "You do have your uses," he confessed.

"As a parliamentary hatchet man? I think…I am afraid…there will be more call on me than that," Reymont said.

"Well, conceivably at Beta Virginis. Dubious, though. The robot sent back no indication of intelligent life on the one seemingly Earthlike planet. At most, we might encounter a few savages armed with spears—who would probably not be hostile to us. The dangers are subtler."

Reymont flushed as before. "I'm sorry," Telander added in haste. "I was thinking aloud. No intention of talking to you like a three-year-old. Of course you know all this. I am not entirely convinced by your claim that a degree of military-type discipline may be essential to surviving hazards like possible diseases. But we shall see. Certainly a specialist in rescue and disaster control is going to be welcome."

"You maunder again, Captain," Reymont said. "You're pretty badly shaken by what we're driving into. I believe our chances are not quite as good as you pretended. Right?"

Telander looked around. The corridor was empty, but still he lowered his voice. "I simply don't know. No Bussard ship has been tested under conditions like those ahead of us. Obviously! We will either get through in reasonable shape or we will die, a quick clean death. I saw no reason to make worse what hours remain for our people, by dwelling on that last."

Reymont scowled. "You overlook a third possibility. We may survive, but in *bad* shape."

"How the devil could we?"

"Hard to say. Perhaps we'll take such a buffeting that people are killed. Key personnel, whom we can ill afford to lose—not that fifty is any great number against a world. In such case, however…" Reymont brooded a while. Footsteps thudded beneath the mumble of energies. "They reacted well, on the whole," he said. "They were picked for courage and coolness. In a few instances, though, the picking was not very successful. Suppose we do find ourselves, let's say, disabled. What then? How long will morale last, or sanity itself? I want to be prepared to maintain discipline."

"In that connection," Telander said, cold once more, "please remember that you act under my orders and subject to the articles of the expedition."

"Damnation!" Reymont exploded. "What do you take me for? Some would-be Mao? I'm requesting your authority to deputize a few trustworthy men and *make* them quietly ready for emergencies. I'll issue them weapons, but stunner type. If nothing goes wrong—or if something does but everybody behaves himself—what have we lost?"

"Trust in each other," Telander said.

They had come to the bridge. Reymont entered with his companion, arguing further. Telander made a chopping gesture to shut him up and strode toward the computer. “Anything new?” he asked.

“Yes. The instruments have begun to draw a density map,” Lindgren said. She had started on seeing Reymont and now spoke mechanically, not looking at him. Under the short fair hair her face went red and then white. “It is recommended—” She pointed to the screen and the latest printout.

Telander studied them. “Hm. To pass through a less dense region, we should generate a lateral vector by using the Number Three and Four decelerators in conjunction with the entire accelerator system…A procedure with dangers of its own. This calls for discussion.” He flipped the intercom controls and spoke briefly to the chief engineer and the navigation officer. “In the plotting room. On the double!”

He turned to go. “Captain—” Reymont attempted.

“Not now,” Telander said, already on his way.

“But—”

“The answer is no.” Telander vanished out the door.

Reymont stood a moment, head lowered and shoulders hunched as if to charge. But he had nowhere to go. Ingrid Lindgren regarded him for a time that shivered—a minute or more ship’s chronology, which was half an hour in the lives of the stars and planets—before she said, quite softly: “What did you want of him?”

“Oh.” Reymont turned about. “His order to recruit a small police reserve. He gave me something stupid about my not trusting my fellows.”

Their eyes locked. “And not letting them alone in what may be their final hours,” she said.

"I know. There's little for them to do, they think, except wait. So they'll spend the time...talking; reading favorite poems; eating favorite foods, with maybe a wine ration for this occasion; playing music, opera and ballet and theater tapes, or in some cases, something livelier, maybe bawdier; making love. Especially making love." Reymont spat out his words.

"Is that so bad?" she asked. "If we must go out, shouldn't we do so in a civilized, decent, life-loving way?"

"By being a trifle less civilized, *et cetera*, we might increase our chance of not going out," Reymont snapped.

She bridled. "Are you that afraid to die?"

Reymont shrugged. "No. But I like to live."

"I wonder. You know why I left you. Not your crudeness by itself. You can't help your background. But your unwillingness to do anything about overcoming it. Your caveman jealousy, for instance."

"I do have a poor man's primitive morality," he said. "Frankly, having seen what education and culture make people into, I'm less and less interested in acquiring them."

The spirit gave way in her. Her eyes blurred, she reached out to touch him and said, "Oh, Carl, are we going to fight the same old fight over again, now on perhaps our last day alive?" He stood rigid. She went on, fast: "I admired you. I wanted you to be my life's partner, the father of my children—on Beta Three if we find we really can settle there; on Earth if we have to return. But we're so alone, here between the stars! We have to take what comfort we can, and give it, or we may not survive."

"Unless we can control our own emotions," he said.

"Do you think there was any emotion...anything but friendship, and pity, and—and a wish to make sure he did *not* fall seriously in love with me—

with Harry? Why, he's hardly more than a boy! And the articles say, in so many words, we can't have formal marriages en route, because we're already too constricted and deprived in every other way—"

"So you and I terminated a relationship which had become unsatisfactory," Reymont said.

"You've found plenty of others since!" she flared.

"For a week or two. So have you. No matter. As you have said, we're both free individuals. Why should I carry a grudge, just because it turned out to be impossible to keep a social relationship with you? I certainly don't want to spoil your fun after you go off watch."

Knuckles stood white on her fists. "What will you be doing?"

"Since I wasn't given authority to deputize," Reymont said, "I'll have to ask for volunteers."

"You can't!"

"I wasn't actually forbidden. I'll only ask a few men, in private, who are likely to agree. Are you going to tell the captain?"

She turned from him. "No," she said. "Please go away."

His boots clacked off down the companion.

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The ship drove on.

She was not small. This hull must house fifty human beings, with every life-support apparatus required in the ultimate hostility which is outer space. It must carry closed-ecology food, air, and waste-disposal systems, tools, machinery, supplies, spare parts, instruments, references, a pair of auxiliary craft capable of ferrying to and from a planetary surface.

For the expedition was not merely going for a look: not at such cost in resources, labor, skill, dreams and years.

At a minimum, these people would spend half a decade in the Beta Virginis System, learning what little they could. But if the third planet where the robot probe was now in orbit, from which it beamed its signals to an Earth that received them a generation later…if that planet really was habitable, the expedition never would come home, not even the professional spacemen. They would live out their lives, and belike their children and grandchildren would too, exploring its manifold mysteries and flashing their discoveries to the hungry minds on Earth. For any planet is a *world* infinitely complex, infinitely varied. And this world seemed to be so homelike that the strangenesses it must hold would be yet the more vivid.

The folk of *Leonora Christine* were quite frank in their hope that they could indeed establish a true scientific base. They often speculated that their descendants might have no desire whatsoever to go back: that Beta Three might evolve from base to colony to New Earth to jumping off place for the next starward leap. For there was no other way by which man could travel far in the galaxy.

Consider: A single lightyear is an inconceivable abyss. Denumerable, but inconceivable. At an ordinary speed—say, a good pace for a car in megalopolitan traffic, two kilometers per minute—one would need almost nine million years to cross it. And in Sol's neighborhood, the stars averaged some nine lightyears apart. Beta Virginis was thirty-two distant.

Nevertheless, such spaces could be conquered. A ship accelerating continuously at one gravity would have traveled half a lightyear in less than one year of time. And she would be moving very near the ultimate velocity, 300,000 kilometers per second. Thereafter she could, so to speak, coast along at one lightyear per year: until, within half a lightyear of journey's end, she began her deceleration.

But that is an incomplete picture. It takes no account of relativity. Precisely because there is an absolute limiting speed (at which light travels in vacuo; likewise neutrinos) there is an interdependence of space, time, mass, and energy. The tau factor enters the equations.

An outside observer, "at rest," measures the mass of the spaceship. The result he gets is the mass that the ship would have, measured when she was not moving with respect to him, divided by tau. Thus, the faster the ship moves, the more massive she is, as regards the universe at large. She gets this extra mass from the sheer kinetic energy of motion: E = mc2.

Furthermore, if the "stationary" observer could compare the ship's clocks with his own, he would notice a difference. The interlude between two events (such as the birth and the death of a man) measured aboard the ship where they take place, is equal to the interlude which the outsider measures—also divided by tau. One might say that time moves proportionately slower on a starship.

Lengths, however, shrink; the outsider sees the ship shortened in the direction of motion by the factor tau.

But measurements made on shipboard are every bit as valid as those made outside. To a crewman, looking forth at the universe, the stars are compressed and have gained in mass; the distances between them have shriveled; they shine, they evolve at a strangely increase rate. *He* has not changed, not with respect to himself. How could he?

Yet the picture is more complicated even than this. One must bear in mind that the ship has, in fact, been accelerated and will be decelerated in relation to the general background of the cosmos. This takes the whole problem out of special and into general relativity. The ship-star situation is not really symmetrical. When velocities match once again and reunion takes place, the star will have passed through a longer time than the ship did.

So to reach other suns in a reasonable portion of your life expectancy—Accelerate continuously, right up to the interstellar midpoint, when you make turnover and start slowing down *again*. You are limited by the speed of light, which you can never quite reach. But you are not limited in how close you can approach that speed. And thus you have no limit on your tau factor.

Practical problems arise. Where is the mass-energy to do this coming from? It would be useful to run tau down to 1/100. You could cross a light-century in a single year of your own experience. (Though of course you could never regain the century which had passed in the outside universe, during which your friends grew old and died.) But this would also, inevitably, involve a hundredfold increase of mass. Each ton of ship that left the Solar System must become a hundred tons. The thought of carrying enough fuel along from the start is ludicrous.

But who says we must do so? Fuel and reaction mass are there in space! It is pervaded with hydrogen. True, the concentration is not great by ordinary standards—about one atom per cubic centimeter in the galactic vicinity of Sol. But this makes thirty billion atoms per second, striking every square centimeter of the ship's cross-section, when she approaches light speed. The energies are unthinkable. Megaroentgens per hour of hard radiation would be released by impact; and more than a thousand *r* within an hour are fatal. No material shielding would help. Even supposing it impossibly thick to start with, it would soon be eroded away.

However, in the days of *Leonora Christine* nonmaterial means were available: magnetohydrodynamic fields, whose pulses reached forth across millions of kilometers to seize atoms by their dipoles and control their streaming. These fields did not serve passively, as mere armor. They fed the gas into a ramjet system—if that phrase may be used for the starlike violence of an ongoing thermonuclear reaction, and for the hurricane of plasma cast aft to push the ship nearer and nearer ultimate *c*.

The forces involved were not just enormous; of necessity, they were precise. They were, indeed, so precise that they could be used within the hull as well as outside. They could operate on the asymmetries of atoms and molecules to produce an acceleration uniform with that of the basic field-generator complex itself. Rather, that uniformity was minus one terrestrial gravity. In effect, weight remained constant aboard, no matter how high the rate at which the ship gained speed.

This cushioning was only possible at relativistic velocities. While tau was small, atoms were insufficiently massive, skittish. But as they approached *c*, they grew heavier—not to themselves, of course, but to everything else—and so the interplay of fields between ship and universe could establish a stable configuration.

Thus the flight pattern was: A year at one gee, to get near light speed. Switch over to cushioned, high-acceleration mode. The bulk of the journey would be covered in a few months of crew time. At the end, another year must pass while the ship braked to interplanetary velocities and closed in on her goal.

And so, because velocity was never constant, the “twin paradox” did not arise. Tau was no static multiplying factor; it was dynamic; its work on mass, space and time could be observed as a fundamental thing, creating a forever different relationship between men and the universe through which they traveled.

The ship was not small. Yet she was the barest glint of metal, in that vast immaterial web of forces which surrounded and permeated her. She herself no longer generated them. She had initiated the process, when she reached minimum ram-jet speed; but now it was too huge, too swift, it could only be created and sustained by itself. The primary reactor, the venturi tubes, the entire system which thrust her, was not contained in the hull. Most of it was not material at all, but a resultant of cosmic-scale forces. The ship's control devices, under computer direction, were not remotely analogous to autopilots. They were more like catalysts, which judiciously used could affect the course of those appalling reactions, could build them up, in time slow them down and snuff them out—but not fast.

A month of cosmic time, a day of interior time, was too little to swerve around the suddenly perceived nebular pit. Only a few things could be done. Then nothing remained except to wait and see if she survived.

She struck.

It was too swiftly changing a pattern of assault too great. The delicate dance of energies which balanced out acceleration pressures could not be continued. The computer directed a circuit to break, shutting off that particular system, before positive feedback wrecked it.

Spacesuited, strapped into safety cocoons, alone with whatever memory could be kept of a farewell handclasp or kiss, the folk of *Leonora Christine* felt weight shift and change. A troll sat on each chest and choked each throat, darkness went raggedly before eyes. Sweat started forth, hearts slugged, pulses brawled. That noise was answered by the ship, a metal *groan,* a rip and a crash. She was not meant to endure stresses like these.

Her safety factors were small; mass was too precious for anything else. And she rammed hydrogen atoms swollen to the heaviness of silicon or phosphorus, dust particles bloated into meteoroids. Velocity had flattened the cloud longitudinally; it was thin—she tore through in seconds. But by that same token, the nebulina was no longer a cloud to her. It was a well-nigh solid wall.

Her outside force-screens absorbed the battering, flung matter aside in turbulent streams, protected the hull from everything except slowdown drag. But reaction was inevitable, on the fields themselves and thus on the devices which, borne outside, produced and controlled them. Frameworks crumpled. Electronic elements fused. Cryogenic liquids boiled from shattered containers.

So one of the thermonuclear fires went out.

The stars saw the event differently. They saw a tenuous murky mist struck by an object incredibly swift and dense. Hydromagnetic forces snatched at atoms, whirled them about, ionized them, battered them together. The object was encompassed in a meteor blaze. During the hour or so of its passage, it drilled a tunnel through the nebulina. That tunnel was wider than the drill, because a shock wave spread outward-and outward and outward and outward, destroying what stability there had been, casting substance forth in gouts and tatters.

A sun and planets had been in embryo here. Now they would never form.

The invader passed. It had not lost much speed. Accelerating once more, it dwindled away toward remoter stars.

Reymont struggled back to consciousness. He could not have been darkened long. Could he? Noise had ceased. Was he deafened? Had the air puffed through some hole into space? Were the screens down, had gamma-colored death already sleeted through him?

No. When he listened, he made out the familiar low beat of energies. Perhaps it even penetrated him a bit louder than formerly. Perhaps the deck's subliminal shiver had quickened a trifle. The hull structure must be loosened by what it had undergone. Yet a fluoropanel shone steadily in his vision. The shadow of his cocoon frame was cast on a bulkhead and had the soft edges which betokened ample air. Weight had returned to a single gee. "To hell with melodrama," he heard himself say. His voice sounded far-off, a stranger's. "We got work."

He fumbled with his harness. Muscles throbbed and ached. A trickle of blood ran over his mouth, tasting salty. Or was it sweat? *Nichevo.* He was functional. He crawled free, opened his helmet, sniffed—slight smell of scorch and ozone, nothing serious—and gusted one deep sigh before shedding his spacesuit.

His cabin half was a mess. The brackets holding his meager personal belongings on their shelves had given way and let everything smash across the deck. He found his stunner beneath his regular bunk and strapped it on before sliding aside the panel which cut off the other section.

Chi-yuen Ai-ling's slight form lay inert. Reymont unlatched her faceplate and listened carefully. Her breathing was normal, no wheeze or gurgle to suggest injured lungs. Probably she had just fainted. He left her. Others might need help worse. No strong sentiment was between him and her anyway. After breaking up with Ingrid Lindgren and playing the field a bit, he'd moved in with Chi-yuen on a basis of mutual convenience. She didn't want to appear standoffish, but her consuming interest was in developing some ideas about planetology which the probe data from their goal had suggested to her. A steady relationship with one man kept the rest from making well-intentioned advances. Similarly, he wanted to retire from close human contacts without being obvious about it. Nobody had to know that the panel across this cabin was usually drawn shut.

Ivan Fedoroff was already out in the corridor. “How goes it?” Reymont hailed.

“I am on my way to see,” the engineer flung back and ran.

“But—” Reymont cut off his words and pushed into Johann Freiwald’s section. The machinist sat slumped on his bunk. *“Raus mit dir,”* Reymont said. “And don’t forget your gun.”

“I have a headache like carpenters in my skull,” Freiwald protested.

“You offered to help me. I thought you were a man.”

Freiwald cast Reymont a resentful glance, but got into motion. They were busy for the next hour. *Leonora Christine*’s crew was busier yet, inspecting, measuring, conferring low-voiced and apart. But that, at least, gave them little time to feel pain or let terror grow. The scientist majority had no such anodyne. From the fact that they were alive and the ship apparently working as before, they might have drawn cheer…only why didn’t Captain Telander announce anything? Reymont bullied them into commons, started some making coffee and others attending to the most badly bruised. At last he went alone to the command bridge.

The door was closed. He knocked. Fedoroff ’s voice boomed, “No admittance. Please wait for the captain to address you.”

“This is the constable,” Reymont said.

“Well? Haven’t you anything better to do than meddle?” Lindgren called.

“I’ve assembled your passengers,” Reymont said. “They’re getting over being stunned. They’re beginning to realize something isn’t quite right. Not knowing what, in their present condition, will crack them open. Maybe we won’t be able to glue the pieces back together.”

“Go tell them an announcement will be made very soon,” Telander said without steadiness.

“You tell them. The intercom’s working, isn’t it? Tell them you’re making exact evaluations of damage, so you can layout a program for repair as soon as possible. But first let me in to help find words for announcing the disaster.”

The door flew wide. Fedoroff grabbed Reymont’s arm and tried to pull him through. Reymont yanked free, an expert movement. His other hand smacked stingingly edge-on across the engineer’s wrist. “Don’t do that,” he said. “Not ever.” He stepped into the bridge and closed the door himself.

Fedoroff growled and doubled his fists. Lindgren hurried to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. “No, Ivan,” she begged. “Please.” The Russian subsided, stiffly. They glowered at him in the thrumming stillness: captain, mate, engineer, second engineer, navigation officer, biosystems chief. He looked past them. The console had suffered, some panels twisted, some meters torn loose. “Is that the trouble?” he asked, pointing.

“No,” said Boudreau, the navigator. “Instruments can be replaced.”

Reymont sought the viewscope. The compensator circuits were also dead. He put his head into the hood of the electronic periscope.

A hemispheric simulacrum sprang from the darkness at him: uncompensated, the view he would actually have seen from outside on the hull. At light speed, aberration distorted the sky. The stars were crowded forward, streaming thinly amidships; and because of Doppler effect they shone steel blue, violet, X-ray. Aft the patterns approached what had once been familiar—but not very closely, and those stars were reddened, like dying embers, as if time were snuffing them out. Reymont shuddered a little and drew his head back into the comforting smallness of the bridge.

“Well?” he said.

“The decelerator system—” Telander swallowed. “We cannot stop.”

Reymont’s face went altogether expressionless. “Go on,” he said.

Fedoroff spoke. His words came flat with fury. “You will recall, I hope, we had activated the decelerators, two of them anyhow, but they belong to an integrated system. Which has to be a separate system from the accelerators, since to slow down we do not push gas through a ram jet but reverse its vector.”

Reymont did not stir at the insult. Lindgren caught her breath. After a moment Fedoroff sagged.

“Well,” he said tiredly, “the accelerators were operating too. I imagine, on that account, their field strength protected them. But the decelerators—out. Wrecked.”

“How?”

“We can only determine that the thermonuclear core is extinguished. In the nature of the case, the decelerators must have been subject to greater stress than the accelerators. I suppose that those forces, reacting through the hydromagnetic fields, broke apart the material assembly which they contain. That assembly, you know, generates and maintains the magnetic bottle which itself contains the ongoing atomic reactions.” Fedoroff looked at the deck. “No doubt we could repair the system if we could get at it,” he muttered. “But no one can go near the reaction which powers the accelerator and live long enough to do any work. Nor could any remote-control robot we might build. Too much radiation for its circuits. And, of course, we cannot shut off the accelerator. That would mean shutting off the whole set of forcefields which it maintains. Hydrogen bombardment would kill everyone aboard within a minute."

"We have no directional control whatsoever?" Reymont asked, still without tone.

"Yes, yes, we do that. The accelerator pattern can be varied," Boudreau said. "It has four Venturis, and we can damp down some—get a sidewise as well as forward vector—but don't you see, on any path we take, we must continue accelerating or we die."

"Accelerating forever," Telander said.

"At least, though," Lindgren whispered, "we can stay in the galaxy. Swing around and around its heart." Her gaze went to the viewscope, and they knew what she thought of: behind that curtain of blue stars, blackness, intergalactic void, an ultimate aloneness. "At least...we can grow old...with suns around us. Even if we can't ever touch a planet again."

Telander's features writhed. He cried, "How do I tell I our people?"

"We have no hope," Reymont said. It was hardly a question.

"None," Fedoroff said.

"Oh, we can live out our lives," said Pereira. "The biosystems have triple protection. They are intact. We could actually increase their productivity. Do not fear hunger or thirst or suffocation. But I would not advise that we have children."

Lindgren said out of nightmare, staring at a bulkhead as if she could see through: "When the last of us dies—We must put in an automatic cutoff. The ship must not keep on running after our deaths. Let the radiation do what it will, let cosmic friction break her to bits and let the bits drift off into those millions of lightyears…yonder.

“Why?” asked Reymont like a machine.

“Isn’t it obvious? If we throw ourselves into a circular path…consuming hydrogen in our accelerator, always traveling faster, running tau down and down as the thousands of years pass…we get more massive. We could end by consuming the galaxy.”

Telander laughed, a harsh little noise in his throat. “No. Not that,” he said. “I have seen calculations. They were made in the early stages of discussing Bussard ships. Someone worried about one getting out of control. But it isn’t serious. A spacecraft, any human work, is too insignificant. Tau would have to become something like, well, shall we say ten to the minus twentieth power, before the ship’s mass was equal to that of a very small star, And the odds are always astronomical against her colliding with anything more important than a nebula. Besides, the universe won’t last so long. No, we are going to die. But the cosmos is safe from us.”

“How long can we live?” Lindgren breathed. She cut Pereira off. “I don’t mean in ship’s time. If you say we can manage to die of old age, I believe you. But I think in a year or two we will stop eating, or cut our throats, or agree to turn the accelerator off, or something.”

“Not if I can help it,” Reymont snapped.

She gave him a dreary look. “Do you mean you would continue—not just cut off from man, from living Earth, but from the whole universe?”

He regarded her steadily in return. One hand rested on his gun butt. “Don’t you have that much guts?” he asked.

“But fifty years inside this flying hell!” she nearly screamed. “How many will that be outside?”

“Easy,” Fedoroff said and took her by the shoulders. She clung to him and snatched after air.

Boudreau said, carefully dry: “The time relationship appears to be somewhat academic to us, *n’est-ce pas?* And it depends in any case on what course we take. If we let ourselves continue straight out into space, naturally we will enter a much thinner interstellar medium. The rate of decrease of tau will be proportionately smaller than here, and get smaller as we move beyond this entire group of galaxies. On the other hand, if we stay within our own galaxy, if we try for a cyclical path taking us through the denser hydrogen concentrations, we could soon get a very small tau. We might see billions of years go by. That could be quite fascinating.” His smile was forced. “And we have each other. A goodly company. I am with the constable. There are better ways to live, but also worse.”

Lindgren hid her face against Fedoroff ’s breast. He held her with one arm, patted her awkwardly with the other hand. After a while (an hour or so in the history of the stars) she looked up again.

“I’m sorry,” she gulped. “You’re right. We do have each other.” Her glance went from one to the next, ending at Reymont.

“But, but how shall I tell them?” Telander groaned.

“I suggest you do not,” Reymont said. “Let the mate break the news.”

“What?” Lindgren asked.

“You are a *simpático* person,” he said. “I remember.”

“She moved from Fedoroff ’s loosened grasp, a step toward Reymont. Abruptly the constable tautened. He stood for a second as if blind, before he whirled from her and confronted the navigator.

“Quick!” he exclaimed. “Do you know—”

“If you think I should—” Lindgren had begun to say.

“Not now,” he interrupted, “Boudreau, come here! We have some figuring to do.”

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The silence went on and on.

Ingrid Lindgren stared from the dais where she stood with Lars Telander, down at her people. They looked back at her. And not a one in that chamber could find words.

Hers had been well chosen. The truth was less savage in her voice than in any man’s. But when she came to her planned midpoint—“We have lost Earth, lost Beta Three, lost the mankind we belonged to. We have left to us courage, love and, yes, hope”—she could not continue. She stood with lip caught between teeth, fingers twisted together, and the slow tears ran from her eyes.

Telander bestirred himself. “Ah!...if you will be so good,” he tried, “kindly listen. A means does not exist...” The ship jeered at him in her tone of distant lightnings.

Glassgold broke. She did not weep loudly, but her very struggle to stop made the sound more dreadful. M’Botu, beside her, attempted consolation. He, though, had clamped such stoicism on himself that he might as well have been a robot. Iwamoto withdrew a little from them both, from them all, one could see how he pulled his soul into some nirvana with a lock on its door. Williams shook his fists at the overhead and raved. Another voice, female, started to keen. A woman considered the man with whom she had been keeping company, said, “You, for my whole life?" and stalked from him. He tried to follow her and bumped into a crewman who snarled and offered to fight if he didn't apologize. A seething went through the entire human mass.

"Listen to me," Telander called. "Please listen."

Reymont shook loose the arm which Chi-yuen Ai-ling clutched, in the first row, and jumped onto the dais. "You'll never bring them around that way," he warned *sotto voce.* "You've always worked with disciplined professionals. Let me handle these civilians." He turned on them. "Quiet, there!" Echoes bounced aronnd his roar. "Shut your hatches. Act like adults for once. We haven't the personnel to change your diapers for you."

Williams yelped with resentment. M'Botu growled, rather more meaningfully. Reymont drew his stunner. "Hold your places!" He dropped his vocal volume, but everyone heard him as if he stood beside. "The first one to move gets knocked out. Afterward we'll court-martial him. I'm the constable of this expedition, and I intend to maintain order and effective cooperation." He grinned into their faces. "If you feel I exceed my authority, you're welcome to file a complaint with the appropriate bureau in Stockholm. But for now, you'll listen!''

He tongue-lashed them until their adrenals seemed to be active again. It didn't take long.

"Very well," he finished and turned mild. "We'll say no more about this. I realize you've had a shock which none of you were prepared psychologically to meet. But we've nevertheless got a problem. And it has a solution, too, of sorts, if we can work together. I repeat: if."

Lindgren had swallowed her weeping. "I think I was supposed to—" she said. He shook his head at her and went on:

“We can’t repair the decelerators because we can’t turn off the accelerators. The reason is, as the mate has explained, we must keep its forcefields for shielding against interstellar gas. So it looks as if we’re bottled in this hull. Which was never intended to house us for more than a few years, ship’s time. Well, I don’t like the prospect either. But I did get an idea. A possibility of escape, if we have the nerve and determination. Navigator Boudreau checked the figures for me. We have a chance of success.”

“Get to the point, will you?” yelled Williams.

“I’m glad to see some spirit,” Reymont said. “It’ll have to be kept under control, though or we are finished. But, to make this as short as possible—afterward Captain Telander and the specialist officers can explain details—the idea is this.”

His flat delivery might have been used to describe a new method of book-keeping. “If we can leave the galaxy, get out where gas is virtually nonexistent in space, we can safely turn off the fields. Then we can go outside of the hull and repair the decelerators. Now astronomical data are not as precise as one might like, but we do know that even in nearby intergalactic space, the medium is too dense. Much thinner than here, of course, but still so thick, in terms of atoms struck per second, as to kill us without protection.

“However, galaxies generally occur in clusters. Our galaxy, the Magellanic Clouds, M31 in Andromeda, and thirteen others, large and small, make one such group. The space it occupies is about six million lightyears across. Beyond them is an enormously greater distance to the next galactic family. And in that stretch, we hope, the gas is thin enough for us not to need shielding.”

Reymont lifted both hands. He had holstered his gun. "Wait, wait!" he managed to laugh. "Don't bother. I already know what you're trying to say. Ten or twenty million lightyears, however far we must go, is impossible. We haven't the tau for it. A ratio of fifty, or a hundred, or a thousand, does us no good whatsoever. Agreed. But remember, we have no limit on our tau. Especially if we widen our scoop fields and, also, pass through parts of this galaxy where gas is denser than here. Both of these we can do. The exact parameters we've been using were determined by our course to Beta Virginis; but the ship is not restricted to them. We could go as high as ten gee, maybe higher.

"So. A rough estimate indicates that if we swing partway around this galaxy and then plunge straight inward through its middle and out the other side—we'd have to make that partial circuit anyway; we can't turn on a ten*öre* coin at our speed!—we can pick up the necessary tau. Remember, it'll decrease constantly. Our transmit time to Beta would have been much less than we figured on if we hadn't meant to stop there: if, instead of making turnover at midpassage, we had simply kept cramming on the speed. Navigator Boudreau estimates—estimates, mind you; we'll have to gather data as we go; but a good, informed guess—he thinks we can finish with this galaxy and head out beyond it in a little over one year."

"How long cosmic time?" challenged from the gathering.

"Does that matter?" Reymont retorted. "You know the dimensions. The galactic disk is about 100,000 lightyears in diameter. At present we're some 30,000 lightyears from the center. A quarter million years altogether? Who can tell? It'll depend on what course we take, which in turn will depend on what long-range observation can show us." He stabbed a finger at them. *"I* know. You wonder, what if we hit a cloud such as got us into this miserable situation. Well, I have two answers for that. First, we have to take some chances. But second, as our tau gets smaller and smaller, we'll be able to use regions which are denser and denser. We'll have too much mass to be affected as we were this time. Do you see? The more we have, the more we can get. We may well leave the galaxy with an inverse tau on the order of a hundred million. If so, by ship's time we'll be outside of this entire galactic cluster in days!"

"And how do we get back?" Glassgold called—but alert and interested.

"We don't," Reymont admitted. "We keep on till we find another galactic cluster. There we reverse process, decelerate. We'll be helped somewhat by the fact of recession. The other groups are already moving away from ours, you know. We won't have quite so much relative velocity to kill. But eventually we'll be inside a single galaxy. Our tau will be up to something reasonable. We can start looking for a planet where we can live.

"Yes, yes, yes!" he barked into their babble, impatient again. "Millions of years in the future. Millions of lightyears from here. The human race most likely extinct...in this part of the universe. But can't we start over, in another space and time? Or would you rather sit in this metal shell, feeling sorry for yourselves, till you grow senile and die childless? Unless you can't stand the gaff, and blow out the brains you flatter yourselves you have. I'm for going on, as long as strength lasts. Will anyone who feels differently be so good as to get out of the way?"

He stalked from the dais. "Ah...Navigation Officer Boudreau," Telander said into the rising noise. "Will you come here? Ladies and gentlemen, this meeting is now open for questions—"

Chi-yuen Ai-ling caught Reymont's hand. He glanced down at her. "You were marvelous," she exclaimed.

His mouth tightened. He looked from her, from Lindgren, across the group, to the enclosing bulkheads. “Thanks,” he replied curtly. “Wasn’t anything.”

“Oh, but it was. You gave us back hope.” She lowered her gaze and colored. “I am honored to share a cabin with you.”

He didn’t seem to hear. “Anybody could have presented a shiny new idea,” he said. “They’ll grasp at anything, right now. I only expedited matters. When they accept the program, that’s when the real trouble begins.”

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Forcefields shifted about. They were not mere static tubes and screens. What formed them was the incessant intelplay of electromagnetic pulses, whose generation, propagation and heterodyning must be under control at every nanosecond, from the quantum level to the cosmic. As exterior conditions—matter density, radiation, impinging field strengths, gravitational space-curvature—changed, instant by instant, their reaction on the ship’s immaterial web was registered; data were fed into the computers; handling a thousand simultaneous Fourier series as the smallest of their tasks, these machines sent back their answers; the generating and controlling devices, swimming aft of the hull in a vortex of their own output, made their supple adjustments. Into this homeostasis, this tightrope walk across the chance of improper response—which would mean distortion and collapse of the fields, nova-like destruction of the ship—entered a human command. It became part of the data. A starboard intake was widened, a port intake throttled back; but carefully, carefully. *Leonora Christine* swung around onto her new course.

The stars saw the ponderous movement of a steadily larger mass, taking months and years before the deviation from its original track was significant. Not that the object they saw was slow. It was a planet-sized shell of incandescence, where atoms were seized by its outermost force-fringes and excited into thermal, fluorescent, synchrotron radiation. And it came barely behind the wave front which announced its march. But the galaxy was vast. The ship's luminosity was soon lost across lightyears.

The ship's passage crawled through abysses which seemingly had no end.

In her own time, though, the story was another. She moved through a universe ever more strange—more rapidly aging, more massive, more compressed. Thus the rate at which she could gulp down hydrogen, burn some of it to energy and hurl the rest off in a billion-kilometer jetflame… that rate kept increasing for her. Each minute, as counted by her clocks, took a larger fraction off her tau than the last minute had added to it.

Inboard, nothing changed. Air and metal still carried the deep beat of acceleration, whose net internal thrust still stood at an even one gravity. The interior powerplant continued to give light, electricity, thermostatic control.

And the biosystems reclaimed oxygen and water, processed waste, produced food, maintained human life. Entropy increased. People grew older at the ancient rate of sixty seconds per minute, sixty minutes per hour.

But those hours were always less related to the hours and years which passed outside. Loneliness closed on the ship like fingers.

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Reymont paused for a moment at the entrance to commons. The main room lay big and quiet. At first it had been in constant use, an almost hysterical crowding together. But lately, aside from meals, the tendency was for scientists and crewfolk to form little cliques, or retreat into solitariness. Not many ball games went on in the gym any more; the hobby shops were often deserted. No serious quarrels had developed. It was just a matter of confessing by one’s actions that one was weary to death of the same faces and the same conversations, and therefore meant to spend most of the time apart—reading, watching taped shows, writing, thinking, sleeping as much as possible. Offsetting this tendency in some was a change in the sexual habits of others. Reymont wasn’t sure whether that betokened a breakdown or a groping toward a new pattern better suited to present conditions. Maybe both. At any rate, most relationships had become transient, though some groups stayed more or less together as wholes and went in for a good deal of experimentation.

He didn’t care one way or another about that. He wished they’d all pull themselves together, get more exercise and do less brooding. But he couldn’t persuade many. His inflexible enforcement of certain basic rules had pretty well isolated him socially.

Apropos which—yes. He strode across the deck. A light above each of the three dream booths said it was occupied. He fished a master key from his pocket and opened the lids, one by one. Two he closed again. But at the third he swore. The stretched-out body, the face under the somnohelmet, belonged to Emma Glassgold.

For a moment he stood looking down at the little woman. Peace dwelt in her smile. But skin was loose and unhealthily colored. The EEG screens behind the helmet said she was in a soothed condition. So she could be roused fast without danger. Reymont snapped down the override switch on the timer. The oscilloscopic trace of the hypnotic pulses that had been fed into her brain flattened and darkened.

She stirred. *"Shalom, Moshe,"* he heard her whisper. There was nobody aboard named Moshe.

He slid the helmet off, uncovering her eyes. She squeezed them tighter shut, knuckled them, and tried to turn around in the box.

"Come on," Reymont said. "Wake up." He gave her a shake.

She blinked at him. The breath snapped into her. She sat straight. He could almost see the dream fade away behind those eyes. "Come on," he repeated, offering his hand to assist. "Climb out of that damned coffin."

"Ach, no, no," she slurred. "You...I was with my Moshe."

"I'll sorry, but—"

She crumpled into sobbing. Reymont slapped the booth, a cracking across every other noise. "All right," he said, "I'll make that a direct order. Out! And report to Dr. Winblad."

"What the devil's going on here?"

Reymont turned. Norbert Williams must have heard him and come in from the pool, because the chemist was nude and wet. He was also furious. "So now you're bullying women," he said in a thickened tone. "Not even big women. Get away from her."

Reymont stood where he was. "We have regulations about the use of dream booths," he said. "If someone hasn't the self-discipline to observe them, I have to compel."

"Yah! Snooping around, watching us, shoving your nose up everybody's privacy—God, I'm not going to put up with it any longer!"

"Don't," Glassgold pleaded. "Don't fight." She seemed to shrink into herself. "I will go."

"Like hell you will," the North American answered. "Stay. Insist on your rights." His features burned crimson. "I've had a bellyful of this little tin Jesus, and now's the time to do something about him."

Reymont said, spacing his words: "The regulations limiting use of the booths weren't written for fun, Williams. Too much sleep, too much artificial stimulation of dreams, is bad. It becomes addictive. The end result can be insanity."

"Listen." The chemist made an obvious effort to curb his own wrath. "People aren't identical. *You* may think we can be chopped and trimmed to fit your pattern—you and your dragooning us into calisthenics, your arranging work details that any child could see aren't for anything except to keep us busy a few hours per day, your smashing the still that Pedro Rodrigues built—your whole petty dictatorship, ever since the voyage began, worse and worse since we veered off on this Flying Dutchman chase—" He swallowed. "Listen," he said, "Those regulations. Like here. They're written to make sure nobody gets too much dream time. Of course. But how do you know that some of us are getting enough? We've all got to spend some time in the booths. You also, Constable Iron Man. You also. The ship's too sterile an environment. It's a sensory-deprivation place. We've got to have substitutes."

"Certainly—" Reymont interrupted.

"Now how can you tell how much substitute anyone else may need? You don't have the sensitivity God gave a cockroach. Do you know one mucking thing about Emma's background? I do. I know she's a fine, courageous woman...perfectly well able to judge her own necessities, and guide herself... she doesn't need you to run her life for her." Williams pointed. "There's the door. Use it."

"Norbert, don't," Glassgold shivered. She climbed from the box and tried to come between the men. Reymont eased her to one side and answered Williams:

"If exceptions are to be made, the ship's doctor is the one to determine them. Not you. She has to see Dr. Winblad anyway, after this. She can ask him for a medical authorization."

"I know how far she'll get with him. That bastard won't even issue tranquilizers."

"We've a long trip ahead of us. Unforeseeable stresses to undergo. If we start getting dependent on pacifiers—"

"Did you ever think, without some such help, we'll go crazy and die? We'll decide it ourselves, thank you. Now go away, I said!"

Glassgold sought once more to intervene. Reymont had to seize her by the arms to move her.

"Get your hands off her, you swine!" Williams charged in with both fists flailing.

Reymont released Glassgold and drifted back, to where more room for maneuvering was available. Williams yelped and followed. Reymont guarded himself against the inexpert blows until, after a minute, he sprang close. A karate flurry, two chops, a gush from emptied lungs, and Williams went to the deck. He huddled retching. Blood dripped from his nose.

Glassgold shrieked and ran to him. She knelt, pulled him close, glared up at Reymont. “Aren’t you brave?” she spat.

The constable spread his palms. “Was I supposed to let him hit me?”

“You c-c-could have left.”

“No. My duty is to maintain order on board. Until Captain Telander relieves me from that, I’ll continue to do so.”

“Very well,” Glassgold said between her teeth. “We are going to the captain at once. I am lodging a formal complaint against you.”

Reymont shook his head. “It was explained and agreed on,” he answered, “that the skipper mustn’t be bothered with our ordinary troubles and bickerings. Not under these new circumstances, when we’re bound into the absolute unknown. He has to think of the ship.”

Williams groaned his way back toward full consciousness.

“But we will go to First Mate Lindgren,” Reymont said. “I have to file charges against both of you.”

Glassgold compressed her lips. “As you wish,” she said.

“Not Lin’gren,” Williams mouthed. “Lin’gren an’ him, they was—”

“No longer,” Glassgold said. “She couldn’t stand any more of him, even before the disaster. She will be fair.” She rose, helped Williams up, supported him the whole way to officer country.

Several people saw them pass and started to ask what had happened. Reymont glowered them into silence. The looks they returned him were sullen. At the first intercom callbox, he dialed Lindgren’s cabin and requested her to come to the interview room.

It was minuscule but soundproof, a place for confidential hearings and necessary humiliations. Lindgren seated herself behind the desk. She had donned a uniform for the occasion. The fluoropanels spilled light onto her frost-blonde hair; the voice in which she asked Reymont to commence was equally cold.

He gave a short, flat account of what had happened. “I charge Professor Glassgold with violation of a rule on personal hygiene,” he finished, “and Mr. Williams with assault.”

“Mutiny?” Lindgren inquired. Williams looked dismayed.

“No, madam. Assault will suffice,” Reymont said. To the chemist: “Consider yourself lucky. We can’t psychologically afford a full-dress trial, which a charge of mutiny would bring. Not unless you keep on with this kind of behavior.”

“That will do, Constable,” Lindgren snapped. “Professor Glassgold, please give me your version of what happened.”

Anger still upbore the biologist. “I plead guilty to the violation as alleged,” she said without a waver, “but I am also pleading guilty and asking for a full review of my case—of everybody’s case—as provided by the articles. Not Dr. Winblad’s judgment alone; a board of ship’s officers and my colleagues. As for the fight, Norbert was intolerably provoked, and he was made the victim of sheer viciousness.”

“Your statement, Mr. Williams?”

“I don’t know how I stand under your damn reg—” The North American checked himself. “Pardon, ma’am,” he said, a little thickly still through his puffed lips. “I never did memorize space law. I thought common sense and good will would see us through. Reymont may be technically in the right, but I’ve had about as much of his brazen-headed interference as I can tolerate.”

“Then, Professor Glassgold, Mr. Williams, are you willing to abide by my judgment? You are entitled to a regular trial if you so desire.”

Williams managed a lopsided grin. “Matters are bad enough already, ma’am. I suppose this has to go in the log, but maybe it doesn’t have to go in everyone’s ears.”

“Oh, yes,” Glassgold whispered. She caught Williams’ hand.

Reymont opened his mouth. “You are under my authority, Constable,” Lindgren intercepted him. “You may, of course, appeal to Captain Telander.”

“No, madam,” Reymont clipped.

“Very well.” Lindgren leaned back. A smile thawed her features. “I suggest that accusations on every side of the case be dropped…or, more accurately, never *be* filed. Let’s sit down—go ahead, use that bench—let’s talk this problem out as among human beings who are all in, shall I say, the same boat.”

“Him too?” Williams jerked a thumb toward Reymont.

“We must have law and discipline, you know,” Lindgren said mildly. “Without them, we die. Perhaps Constable Reymont gets over-zealous. Or perhaps not. He is, though, the only police and military specialist we have. If you dissent from him—well, that’s what I am here for. Do sit down. I’ll ring for coffee. We might make a raid on our cigarette ration, too.”

“If the mate pleases,” Reymont said, “I’ll excuse myself.”

“No, we have things to say to you also,” Glassgold declared.

Reymont kept his eyes on Lindgren’s. It was as if sparks flew between. “As you explained, madam,” he said, “my business is to uphold the rules of the ship. No more, no less. This has become something else: a personal counselling session. I suggest the lady and gentleman will talk more freely without me."

"I believe you are right, Constable," the mate nodded. "Dismissed."

He sketched a salute and left. On his way down the corridor, Freiwald greeted him with an approximation of cordiality. But then, Freiwald was one of his half dozen deputies.

He entered his cabin. The partition was drawn aside. Chi-yuen Ai-ling sat on his bunk rather than her own. She wore something light and frilly, which made her look like a little girl, a sad one. "Hello," she said tonelessly. "You have thunder in your face. What happened?"

Reymont joined her and related it.

"Well," she sighed, "can you blame them so much?"

"No. I suppose not. Though—I don't know. They're supposed to be the best Earth could offer. Intelligence, education, stable personality, good health, dedication. And they know they'd likely never come home again. At a minimum, they'd come back to an Earth older than the one they left by the better part of a century." Reymont ran a hand through his wirebrush hair. "So things have changed," he said. "We're off to an unknown destiny, maybe to death, certainly to complete isolation. But is this so different from what we were planning on from the start? Should it make people go to pieces?"

"Yes," Chi-yuen said. "It does."

"You too. I've noticed." He gave her a ferocious look. "You were busy at first, your theoretical work, your programming the studies you meant to carry out in the Beta Virginis System. And when the trouble hit us, you rallied as well as anyone."

A ghostly smile crossed her lips. “You inspired me,” she said.

“Since then, however…more and more, you sit doing nothing. I think you and I had the beginnings of, uh, real friendship; but you don’t often make any meaningful contact with me of late, nor with anyone else. No more work. No more big daydreams. Not even much crying into your pillow after lights out…oh, yes, I’d lie awake and hear you. Why, Ai-ling? What’s happening to you? To most of our people?”

“I suppose we have not quite your raw will to survive at any cost,” she said, almost under her breath.

“I’d consider some prices for life too high myself. But here—We have what we need to exist. A certain amount of comfort as well. An adventure like nothing we’d dreamed of. What’s wrong?”

“Do you know what the year is on Earth?” she countered.

“No. I was the one who suggested to Captain Telander he order that particular clock removed. You may as well know that now. Too morbid an attitude was developing around it.”

“Most of us can make our own estimates anyway. At present, I believe it is about 10,000 Anno Domini at home. Give or take some centuries. And, oh, yes, I recognize that for a nonsense statement. I understand about the concept of simultaneity breaking down under relativistic conditions. But still that date does have a meaning. We are absolute exiles. Already. Irrevocably. What has happened on Earth? What is happening throughout the galaxy? What have men done? What are they becoming? We will never share in it. We cannot.”

She had spoken in a level, almost indifferent voice. He tried to break her apathy with sharpness: “What of that? If we’d gone to Beta Three and stayed, we’d have had a thread of radio contact, words a generation old before we heard them. Nothing else. And our own deaths would have closed us off from the universe. The common fate of man. Why should we whine because ours takes an unexpected shape?"

She regarded him for a space before she said, "You don't really want an answer for yourself. You want to provoke one from me."

Startled, he said, "Well…yes."

"You understand people a great deal better than you let on. Your business, I suppose. You tell me what our trouble is."

"Loss of purpose," he said at once. "The crewfolk aren't in such bad condition yet. They have their jobs to keep them occupied. But most of those aboard are scientists. They'd signed their lives over to the Beta Virginis expedition. You, for example, intended to study planetology there. So you had that to look forward to; and meanwhile you had your preparations to play with. Now you have no idea what will happen. You know just that it'll be something altogether different from what you expected. That it may be death—because we are taking some frightful risks—and you can do nothing to help, only sit passive and be carried. Naturally your morale cracks."

"What do you suggest I do, Charles?"

"Well, why not continue your theoretical work? Try to generalize it. Eventually we'll be looking for a planet to settle on. Your specialty will be very much needed."

"You know what the odds are against our ever finding a home. We are going to keep on this devil's chase until we die."

"Damnation, we can improve the odds!"

"How?"

"That's one of the things you'll ought to be working on."

She smiled again, a little more alive. "Do you know, Charles," she said, "you make me want to. If for no other reason than to make you stop flogging at me. Is that why you are so hard on people?"

He considered her. She had borne up thus far better than most. Maybe she would gain fresh courage from, well, sharing with him. And every glint of will and hope was to be nurtured. "Can you keep a trade secret?" he asked.

Her glance actually sparkled. "You should know me that well by now." One bare foot rubbed across his thigh.

He patted it and grinned. "An old principle," he said. "Works in military and para-military organizations. I've been applying it here. The human animal wants a father-mother image but, at the same time, resents being disciplined. You can get stability like this: The ultimate authority-source is kept remote, godlike, practically unapproachable. Your immediate superior is a mean son of a bitch who makes you toe the mark and whom you therefore hate. But *his* superior is as kind and sympathetic as rank allows. Do you follow me?"

She laid a finger to her chin. "No, not really."

"Well, in the present case—oh, you'll never know how carefully I maneuvered, those first few months after we hit the nebulina, to help things work out this way—Captain Telander has been isolated, along with those officers most concerned with the actual operation of the ship. He doesn't realize that. He agreed to my argument that he shouldn't be distracted by ordinary business, because his whole attention must go to getting us safely through the galaxy's clouds and clusters. But this has removed him from the informal, intimate basis on which we operated before. He dines separately, with Boudreau and Fedoroff. He takes his recreation and exercise alone in the cabin we've enlarged for him. When he needs a woman, he requests her most politely to visit him, and never asks the same one twice. And so on and so on.

"I can't claim credit for the whole development. Much of it is natural, almost inevitable evolution. The logic of our problem brought it about, given some nursing by me. The end result, however, is that our good gray friend Lars Telander has been transformed into the Old Man."

Chi-yuen half smiled, half sighed. "Poor Old Man! Why?"

"I told you," Reymont said. "Psychological necessity. The average person aboard has to feel that his life is in competent hands. Of course, no one believes consciously that the captain is infallible. But there's an unconscious need for such an aura. Therefore, we have now established things so that the captain's human-level judgment never is put to the test."

"Lindgren is the surrogate there?" Chi-yuen looked closely at Reymont.

He nodded. "I'm the traditional top sergeant. Hard, harsh, demanding, overbearing, inconsiderate, brutal. Not so bad as to provoke a petition for my removal. But enough to irritate, to be unpopular. That's good for the others, you know. It's healthier to be mad at me than to brood on personal woes…as you, my dear, have been doing.

"Now Lindgren smooths things out. As first mate, she sustains my power. But she also overrides it from time to time. She exercises her rank to bend regulations in favor of need. As a result, she adds benignity to the attributes of Ultimate Authority."

Reymont shrugged. "Thus far, the system's worked," he finished. "It's beginning to break down. We'll have to add a new factor."

Chi-yuen gazed at him so long that he shifted uncomfortably on the bunk. At last she asked, “Did you plan this with Ingrid?”

“Eh?” he said, surprised. “Oh, no. Certainly not. Her role demands that she *not* be a Machiavelli type who plays the part deliberately.”

“You know her so well...from old acquaintance?”

“Yes.” He reddened. “What of that? These days we have to keep aloof from each other. For obvious reasons.”

“I think you find ways to continue rebuffing her, Charles.”

“M-m-m...damnation, leave me alone. What I want to do is help you get back some real will to live.”

“So that I, in turn, can help you keep going?”

“Well, uh, yes. I’m no superman. It’s been too long since anyone held my hand.”

“Are you saying that because you mean it, or because it serves your purpose?” Chi-yuen tossed back her dark locks. “Never mind. Don’t answer. We will help each other, what little we can. Afterward, if we survive—we will settle that when we have survived.”

His dark, scarred features softened. “You have for a fact begun to think in survival terms again,” he said. “Good. Thanks.”

She chuckled. Her arms went about his neck. “Come here, you.”

-8-

The speed of light can be approached, but no body possessing rest mass can quite attain it. Smaller and smaller grew the increments of velocity by which *Leonora Christine* neared that impossible ultimate. Thus it might have seemed that the universe which her crew observed could not be distorted further. Aberration could, at most, displace a star 45°; Doppler effect might infinitely redden the light from astern, but could only double the frequency of light ahead.

But there was no limit on inverse tau, and that was the measure of change in perceived space and experienced time. Accordingly, there was no limit to the violet shift either; and the cosmos fore and aft could shrink toward a zero thickness wherein all the galaxies were crowded.

Thus, as she made her great swing partly around the Milky Way and turned for a plunge straight through its heart, *Leonora Christine*'s periscope revealed a weird demesne. The nearer stars streamed past, faster and faster, until at last the human eye could see them marching across the field of view; because by that time, many years passed outside while a minute or two ticked away inside the ship. That field was no longer black. It was a shimmering purple, which deepened and brightened as the months went by; because the interaction of forcefields and interstellar medium—eventually, interstellar magnetism—was releasing quanta. The farther stars were coalescing into two globes, fiery blue ahead, ember crimson aft. But gradually those globes shrank toward points, and dimmed; because well-nigh the whole of their radiation had been shifted out of the visible spectrum, toward gamma rays and long radio waves.

The viewscope had been repaired, but was increasingly less able to compensate, to show the sky as a stationary observer would have seen it. The circuits simply could not distinguish individual stars any longer, at more than a few parsecs' remove. The electronicians took the instrument apart and rebuilt it to step up lowered and step down heightened frequencies, lest men fly altogether sightless.

That project, and certain other remodelings, provided a useful outlet for those able to help. Such people began to emerge from their shells.

Nonetheless, Reymont found a need to hale the astronomer Elof Nilsson to the interview room.

Ingrid Lindgren sat behind her desk, once more uniformed. She had lost weight, and dark circles lay beneath her eyes. The cabin thrummed louder than normal, and occasionally a shiver went through ribs and deck. Here, in the immense clouds which surrounded the clear space at the galaxy's core, *Leonora Christine* moved according to an eerie sort of aerodynamics. Her inverse tau was now so enormous that density did not trouble her, rather she swallowed matter still more greedily than before. But she flew as if through a wind blowing between the sun clusters.

"So you accuse Dr. Nilsson of spreading disaffection, Constable?" Lindgren's tone was weary. "The articles provide for free speech."

"We are scientists," the astronomer said waspishly. "We have not only the right but the obligation to state what is true." He was a short, rather ugly man who had not gotten along ideally with his fellows even before the crisis came. Since then he had let a scraggly beard grow and seldom bathed. His clothes were begrimed.

Reymont shifted on the bench. Both men were seated at Lindgren's urging. "You don't have the right to spread horror stories," he said. "Didn't you notice what you were doing to Jane Sadler, for instance, when you talked the way you did at mess?"

"I merely brought out into the open what everybody has known from the start," Nilsson rasped. "They hadn't the courage to discuss it in detail. I do."

"They hadn't the meanness to discuss it," Reymont answered. "You do."

"No personalities," Lindgren said. "Tell me what the matter was." She had lately been taking her meals alone in the cabin she shared with the naturalist Olga Sobieski. In fact, she was not seen much off duty.

"You know," Nilsson said. "We've raised the subject before."

She couldn't quite suppress dislike in the look she gave him. "What subject? We've talked about many."

"Talked, yes, like reasonable people," Reymont said. "Not lectured a tableful of shipmates, most of them feeling low already."

"Please, Constable. Proceed, Dr. Nilsson."

The astronomer puffed himself up. "An elementary thing," he said. "I cannot understand why the rest of you have been such idiots as not to give it serious consideration before. You blandly assume we will come to rest in some other galaxy and find a habitable planet. But will you tell me how? Think of the requirements. Mass, temperature, irradiation, atmosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere…the best estimate is that one per cent of the stars have planets which are any approximation to Earth."

"Oh," Lindgren said. "Yes, everybody knows—"

Nilsson was not to be deprived of his platform. Perhaps he didn't bother to hear her. He ticked points off on his fingers. "If one per cent of the stars are suitable, do you realize how many we will have to examine in order to have an even chance of finding what we need? It is conceivable that we will be lucky and come upon our New Earth at the very first star we try. But the odds against this are a hundred to one. Thus we will have to try many. Now the examination of each involves almost a year of deceleration. To depart from it and search elsewhere requires another year of acceleration. Those are years of ship's time, remember, because nearly the whole period is spent at velocities which are small compared to light's and which, thus involve a negligible tau factor. Hence we must allow two of our years per star, as a minimum. The fifty-fifty chance of which I spoke—and mind you, that is only a fifty-fifty chance—the odds are as good that we will not find New Earth in the first seventy-five stars as they are that we will—this chance requires a hundred or a hundred and fifty years of search. We will not live so long. Therefore our whole endeavor, the risks we take in this fantastic dive straight through the galaxy and out into intergalactic space, it is all futile. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*"

"Among your many detestable characteristics, Nilsson," Reymont drawled, "is your habit of droning the obvious through your nose."

"Madam!" the astronomer gasped. "I protest! I shall file charges of personal abuse!"

"Cut back," Lindgren said. "Both of you. I must admit your conduct offers provocation, Dr. Nilsson. On the other hand, Constable, you should remember that Dr. Nilsson is one of the most distinguished men in his profession that Earth has…Earth had. He deserves respect."

"Not the way he behaves," Reymont said. "Or smells."

"Be polite, Constable, or I'll charge you myself," Lindgren said. She drew breath. "You don't seem to make allowance for humanness. We are adrift in space and time; the Earth we knew is a hundred thousand years in its grave; we are rushing nearly blind through a crowded part of space; we may at any minute strike something that will destroy us; at best, we must look forward to months, probably years in a cramped and barren environment. Don't you expect people to react to that?"

"Yes, madam, I do," Reymont said. "I don't, however, expect them to behave so as to make matters worse."

"There is some truth in that," Lindgren admitted.

Nilsson squirmed and looked sulky. “I was just trying to spare them disappointment at the end of this flight,” he muttered.

“Are you quite certain you weren’t indulging your ego—? Never mind. Your standpoint is legitimate.” Lindgren signed.

“No, it isn’t,” Reymont said. “He gets his one per cent by counting every star. Obviously we aren’t going to bother with red dwarfs—the vast majority—or blue giants or anything outside a fairly narrow spectral range. Which reduces the field of search by a whopping factor.”

“Make the factor ten,” Nilsson said. “I don’t really believe that, but let’s grant we have a ten per cent probability of finding New Earth at any one of the Sol-type stars we try. That nevertheless requires us to hunt among five or more to get our even chance. A dozen years? The youngest among us will be past his youth. Some will be getting old. The loss of so many reproductive years means a corresponding loss of heredity; and our gene pool is small, indeed minimal, to start with. You must agree on the impossibility of having children while we are in space. If nothing else, we are too crowded. Yet if we wait one or two decades to start having them, we can’t beget enough. Few will be grown to self-sufficiency by the time their parents start getting helpless with advancing years. And in any case, the human stock will certainly die out in a few generations. I know something about genetic drift, you see.”

He looked smug. “I didn’t wish to hurt your feelings,” he said. “My desire was to be of service, by showing your concept of a bold pioneer community, planting humankind afresh in a new galaxy…showing that chatter for the romantic fantasy which it is.”

“Have you an alternative?” Lindgren asked.

Nilsson's mouth twisted, an uncontrollable tic. "Nothing but realism," he said. "Acceptance of the fact that we will never leave this ship. Adjustment of our behavior to that fact."

"You understand, I suppose," Reymont said, "that for half the people aboard, the logical thing to do once they've decided you're right is to commit suicide."

"That may well be," Nilsson said.

"Do you hate life so much yourself?" Lindgren asked.

Nilsson jerked on the bench. He gobbled. Reymont made haste to say:

"I didn't haul you in here only to scold you. I want to know why you haven't any ideas for improving our chances."

"What ideas?"

"That's what I'm asking you. You're the observational astronomer. As I recall, you were in charge of programs back home which located something like fifty other planetary systems. You actually identified individual planets across all those lightyears. Why can't you do the same for this ship?"

"Ridiculous!" Nilsson pounced. "I see that I must explain the matter in kindergarten terms. Will you bear with me, Mate Lindgren? Listen carefully, Constable. True, a very large spaceborne instrument can pick out an object the size of Jupiter at a distance of several parsecs. This is provided the object gets sufficient illumination, but not so much that it is lost in the glare of its sun. Also true, by mathematical analysis of perturbation data gathered over a period of years, some idea can be obtained about companion planets which are too small to photograph directly. Ambiguities in the equations can, to a degree, be resolved by close interferometric study of flare-type phenomena on the star; planets do exercise a certain small influence upon such cycles.

“But.” His finger prodded Reymont’s chest. “But you do not realize how uncertain those results are. Journalists were fond of trumpeting that yet another Earthlike world had been discovered. The fact always was, however, that this was one possible interpretation of our data. Only one among several possible size and orbit distributions. And subject to a gross probable error. All this, mind you, with the largest, finest instruments which could be orbited. Instruments such as we certainly do not have with us here.

“No, even at home, the sole way to get detailed information about extra-solar planets was to send a probe or a manned expedition there. In our case, the sole way is to decelerate for a close look. And thereafter, I am certain, to go on. Because you must be aware that a planet which otherwise seems ideal could be lifeless, or could have a native biochemistry useless or deadly to us.

“I implore you, Constable, to learn a little science, a little logic, perhaps just a touch of realism. Eh?” Nilsson ended with a crow of triumph.

“Doctor—” Lindgren began.

Reymont smiled crookedly. “Don’t worry, madam,” he said. “No fight will start. His words don’t diminish me.” He regarded the other man with care. “Believe it or not, I knew very well what you’ve told us. I also know you are, or were, an able fellow. That you made some innovations, some new gadgets and systems of your own, which were responsible for a lot of discoveries. Well, why not put your brain to work on the problem we have here?”

“Will you be so good as to condescend to suggest a procedure?” Nilsson fleered.

“I’m no scientist, nor much of a technician,” Reymont said. “But a few things look obvious to me. Let’s suppose we have entered our target galaxy. We’ve shed the ultra-low tau we needed to get there, but we still have one of…oh, whatever is convenient. Ten to the minus third, perhaps? Well, that gives you a mighty long baseline and cosmic-time period to make your observations. In the course of some weeks or months, ship’s time, you can collect more data on a given star than you had on any of Sol’s neighbors. I should think you could find ways to use relativity effects to give you information that wasn’t available at home. And, naturally, you’ll be observing a large number of Sol-type stars simultaneously. So you’re bound to find some which you can prove—prove with such exact figures that there’s no reasonable doubt—have planets with masses and orbits about like Earth’s.”

“But even then,” Lindgren said hesitantly, “the question of atmosphere, biosphere, that remains. We still need to take a close-range look.”

“Yes, yes,” Reymont agreed. “But must we stop to take it? Suppose, instead, we lay out a course which brings us hard by the most promising suns, one after the next—while we continue to travel near light-speed. In cosmic time, we’ll have hours or days to make studies of any planet that interests us. Spectroscopic, thermoscopic, photographic, magnetic, write your own list of clues. We can get a good idea of conditions on the surface. Biological conditions, too. We could look for things like thermodynamic disequilibrium, chlorophyll 11 reflection spectra, polarization by microbe populations based on 1-amino acids… yes, I think we can get an excellent idea of whether that planet is suitable. At high tau, we can examine any number in a short stretch of our own time. Our instruments will have to be automated, in fact; we ourselves couldn't work fast enough. Then, when we do find the right world, we can brake, make turnaround and come back. That will take a couple of years, I admit. But they'll be endurable years. Because we'll know, with very high certainty, that we have a home waiting for us!"

Color mounted in Lindgren's cheeks. Her eyes looked less dull. He had not seen so much life in her for months. "By God," she breathed, "why didn't you speak of this before?"

"I was too busy to think beyond the next day," Reymont said. "Why didn't you, though, Dr. Nilsson?"

"Because the whole thing is absurd," the astronomer said. "You presuppose instrumentation we do not have—"

"Well, can't we build it? We do have tools, precision equipment, construction supplies. Maybe we can't put together an enormous telescope, a mirror a few molecules thick, around the hull, once we're safe in intergalactic space. I'm not sure we can't, but let's assume so. Is that the only way? How about electronic amplification, for instance?"

"You talk of instruments which don't exist. Especially those with which you want to analyze a planet's biochemistry as you zip past at light speed. No such thing—such sensitivity and range—no such thing has ever been constructed."

"Well?" Reymont said.

Nilsson and Lindgren stared at him. Silence thrummed.

"Well, why can't we develop what we need?" Reymont asked in a puzzled voice. "Here's a whole shipful of some of the most talented, highly trained, imaginative people our civilization produced. They include almost any scientific specialty you care to name; but they're used to interdisciplinary work as well. Suppose, for instance, Emma Glassgold and Norbert Williams got together to work out the specifications for a life-analyzing instrument. They'd consult others as needed. Eventually they'd employ physicists, electronicians and such for the actual building and debugging. Meanwhile, you, Dr. Nilsson, have been in charge of a team making gadgets for long-range planetography. In fact, you're the logical man to head up the instrumentation program."

His enthusiasm waxed. The hardness fell from him. He said, eager as a boy: "Why, this is precisely what we've needed! A fascinating, vital sort of job that demands everything everybody can give. And those whose specialties aren't called for, they'll be necessary too. They'll be assistants, manual workers—I suppose we'll have to remodel a lot of the ship's interior to accommodate the bigger instruments—Ingrid, it's a way not just to save our lives but our minds! Our souls!"

He sprang to his feet. She did too. Their hands reached out and clasped.

Suddenly they grew aware of Nilsson.

He sat less than dwarfish, hunched, shivering, altogether collapsed.

Lindgren went to him in alarm. "What's the matter?" she exclaimed.

He stared at the deck. "Impossible," he mumbled. "Impossible."

"No. Surely not," she said urgently. "I mean, you wouldn't have to discover any new laws of nature or anything like that, would you? It seems to be only a question of applying known principles."

"In unheard-of ways." Nilsson hid his face. "God better me, I haven't the brains any more."

Lindgren and Reymont exchanged a look above his bent back. She shaped words, unspoken. Once he had taught her the Rescue Corps emergency trick of lipreading, and they had practiced it as a game they shared, a thing that made them more private and more one. *Can we succeed without him?*

I doubt it. He is in fact the best man to organize that kind of project. At least, lacking him, we have a much poorer chance.

Lindgren sat down beside Nilsson. She laid an arm across his shoulders. “What’s the matter?” she asked most softly.

“I have no hope,” he snuffled. “Nothing to live for.”

“Oh, but you do.”

“What? You know Rosana…deserted me…months ago. No other woman—Why should I care? What’s left for me?”

Reymont’s lips formed, *Now he’s begun pitying himself.* Lindgren frowned and shook her head.

“No, you’re wrong, Elof,” she murmured. “We do care for you. Would we ask for your help now if we didn’t honor you?”

“My mind.” He sat straight and glared at her out of swimming eyes. “You want my mind, yes. My advice. My knowledge and skill. To save yourselves. But do you want me? Do you think of me as, as, as a human being? No! Dirty old Nilsson. One is barely polite to him. *But* when he starts to talk, one finds the earliest possible excuse to leave. One does not invite him to one’s parties. Most certainly never to one’s cabin. At most, if desperate, one asks him to be a fourth for bridge or to lead an instrument development effort. Well, what do you expect him to do? Thank you?”

“But that isn’t true!”

“Oh, I’m not as childish as some,” he said. “I’d help you if I could. But my mind is blank, I tell you. I haven’t had an original thought since the disaster. Call it fear of death paralyzing me. Call it a sort of impotence. I don’t care what you call it. Because you don't care either. No one has offered me friendship, comfort, anything. I have been left alone in the dark and the cold. Do you wonder that my mind has frozen?"

Lindgren looked away, so that none but Reymont could see what expressions chased across her features. When she faced Nilsson again, she was calm.

"I can't say how sorry I am," she told him. "You are a little to blame yourself, Elof. You acted so…so self-sufficient…we assumed you didn't want to be bothered. The way Olga Sobieski, for instance, doesn't want to. That's why she moved in with me. When you moved in with Hussein Sadek —"

"He keeps the panel closed between our halves," Nilsson shrilled. "He never opens it. But I often hear, off-watch, first one girl in there, then another."

"Well, but now we understand," Lindgren said. She smiled. "And to be quite honest, Elof, I've grown a little tired of my own current existence."

Nilsson made a strangled noise.

"I believe we have some personal business to discuss," Lindgren said. She was pale again, but continued to smile. "Do you mind, Constable?"

"No," said Reymont. "Of course not." He left the cabin.

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Leonora Christine stormed through the galactic nucleus in 20,000 years. To those aboard, the time was measured in hours. They were hours of tension, while the hull shook and groaned from stress, and the outside view was of little more than a blinding blazing fog: because here the concentration of interstellar matter was great indeed. The chance of striking a sun was not negligible; lurking in a dust cloud, it could be upon the ship before any course alteration was possible. (No one knew what would happen to the star. It might go nova. But certainly the vessel herself would be destroyed, too swiftly for her crew to realize they were dead.) On the other hand, this was the region where tau plunged to values that could merely be estimated, not measured with precision, most surely not comprehended.

There was a respite while she crossed the region of clear space at the very center, like passing through the eye of a hurricane. Foxe-Jameson, the astrophysicist, came near weeping. "Too bloody awful! The answers to a million questions, right here, and I've not a single instrument adapted for the conditions!"

His shipmates grinned. "And where would you publish?" someone asked. Renascent hope was often expressing itself in a land of gallows humor.

But there was no joking when Boudreau called a conference with Telander and Reymont. That was soon after the ship had emerged from the dust clouds on the far side of the nucleus—by then, her jets used dust as readily as gas—and headed out through a spiral arm. The viewscope showed a red fireball dwindling behind, a gathering darkness ahead. People off duty celebrated in commons with music, dance, a liquor ration. They had run the cosmic shoals and not been wrecked. Laughter, stamping, lilt of an accordion drifted faintly to the bridge.

"It's like this," the navigator said. "Nilsson's project is showing results already, you know; and we also have my standard observational gear, together with some stuff intended for research from a Beta Virginis base. I prepared to take my readings before we entered the galactic core. Now that we're out, I have taken them."

Captain Telander's gaunted visage grew tight, as if readying for a new blow. "What result?" he asked.

"What readings?" Reymont added. "I mean, what specifically were you studying?"

"Matter density in space ahead of us," Boudreau said. "Within this galaxy, between galaxies, between galactic clusters. Given our present tau, the frequency shift of the neutral-hydrogen radio spectrum, I can get results of unprecedented accuracy."

"Oh, yes. That. What have you found out?"

Boudreau braced himself. "The gas concentration drops off more slowly than we thought," he said. "With the tau we will probably have by the time we leave this galaxy...thirty million lightyears out, as nearly as I can determine, we still will not dare turn off the forcefields."

Telander closed his eyes. Reymont nodded, jerkily. "We've discussed the possibility of that being the case," he said, word by word. The scar stood livid on his brow. "That even halfway between two clusters, we won't be able to make our repair. But you act as if you had some proposal."

"The one we talked about, you and I," Boudreau said to the captain.

Reymont waited.

Boudreau told him in a dispassionate voice: "The astronomers had learned before we left home, a cluster or family of galaxies like our local group is not the highest form in which matter is organized. Such groups of one or two dozen galaxies do, in turn, tend to occur in larger associations. Superfamilies, so to speak—"

Reymont made a rusty chuckle. "Call them clans," he suggested.

"Eh? Why…well. All right. A clan is composed of several families. Now the average distance between members of a family is, oh, perhaps a million lightyears.

The average distance between one family and the next is greater, as one would expect: on the order of fifty million lightyears. Our plan was to leave this family and go to the nearest attainable one beyond. Both would have belonged to the same clan."

"Instead, we'll have to leave the entire clan," Reymont said.

"Yes, I am afraid so."

"How far is it to the next one?"

"I don't know. I didn't take journals along. They would be a little obsolete by now, eh?"

"Be careful," Telander warned.

Boudreau gulped. "I beg the captain's pardon. That was a rather dangerous joke." He went back to lecturing tone: "I don't believe anyone was sure. Probably less than five hundred million lightyears, though. Otherwise the hierarchical structure of the galaxies would have been easier for astronomers to identify than it was. Surely, between such clans, space is so close to an absolute vacuum that we won't need protection."

"Can we navigate there?" Reymont demanded.

Sweat glistened on Boudreau's cheeks. "You see the risk," he said. "We will be bound into the totally unknown. Accurate sightings and placements will be unobtainable. We shall need such a tau—"

"A minute," Reymont said. "Let me outline the situation in my layman's language, to make sure I understand you." He paused, rubbing his chin with a sandpapery sound (under the distant music), frowning, until his thoughts were collected.

“We must get—not only into interfamily but interclan space,” he said. “We must do this in a reasonable shipboard time. Therefore we must run tau down to a value of a billionth or less. Can we do this at all? Evidently so, or you wouldn’t talk as you’ve done. I imagine the method is to set ourselves a course within this family such that we will pass through the nuclei of at least one other galaxy. And then go likewise through the next family—through as many individual galaxies as possible, always accelerating.

“Once the entire clan is behind us, we should be able to make our repair. But then we’ll need a similar period of deceleration. And because our tau will be so great and space so utterly empty, we’ll be unable to steer. Not enough material will be there for the jets to work on, nor enough navigational data to guide us. We’ll just have to hope that we’ll pass through another clan.

“We should do that. Eventually. By sheer statistics. But we may go so far first that the expansion of the universe will be working against us. We may be out yonder a long while indeed.”

“Correct,” Telander said. “You do understand.”

—But me and my true love will never meet again,
On the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond.

“Well,” Reymont said, “there doesn’t appear to be any virtue in caution. In fact, for us it’s become a vice.”

“What do you mean?” Boudreau asked.

Reymont shrugged. “We need more than the tau for crossing space to the next clan. We need the tau for a hunt which may take us past any number of clans, through billions of lightyears, until we find one we can enter. I trust you can plot us a course within this first clan that will give us that kind of tau. Don’t worry about collisions with anything. We can’t afford such worries. Just steer us through the densest dust and gas you can find.”

“You…are taking this…rather coolly,” Telander said.

“What am I supposed to do? Burst into tears?”

“That’s why I thought you should also hear the news first,” Boudreau said. “You may know how to break it to the others.”

Reymont considered both men for a moment that stretched. “I’m not the captain, you know,” he said softly. Telander’s smile was a spasm. “In certain respects, Constable, you are—”

Reymont turned, went to the instrument console, stood before those goblin eyes with head bent and thumbs hooked in belt. “Well,” he said. “If you really want me to take charge.”

“I think you had better.”

“Well, in that case. They’re good people. Morale is bound upward again, now that they see some genuine accomplishment of their own. I think they’ll be able to realize, not just intellectually but emotionally, that there is no human difference between a million and a billion, or ten billion, lightyears. The exile is still the same.”

“But the time involved—” Telander said.

“Yes. That.” Reymont looked at them again. “I don’t know how much more of our own lifespans we can devote to this voyage. Not very much. The conditions are too unnatural. So we absolutely have to raise tau as high as may be, no matter what the hazard. Not simply to make the trip itself short enough for us to endure. But for the psychological need to do our utmost, at all times.”

“How is that?”

“Don’t you see? It’s our way of fighting back at the universe. *Vogue la galère*. Go for broke. Full steam ahead and damn the torpedoes. I think, if I can put the matter to our people in such terms, they’ll rally. For a while, anyhow.”

The wee birdies sing and the flowers of spring,
And in sunshine the waters are sleeping—

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Dark.

The absolute night.

Instruments, straining magnification, reconverting wavelengths, identified some glimmer in that pit. Human senses found nothing, nothing.

“We’re dead.” Fedoroff ’s voice echoed in helmets and earplugs.

“I feel alive,” Reymont said.

“What else is death but the final cutting off? No sun, no stars, no sound, no weight, no shadow—” Fedoroff s breath was ragged, to clear over a radio which no longer carried the surf noise of cosmic interference. His head was invisible against empty space. The lamp at his waist threw a dull puddle of light onto the hull, that was reflected and lost in horrible distances.

“Keep moving,” Reymont ordered.

“Why are you out with this work party, Constable?” said another man’s voice. “What do you know about it?”

“I know we’d better get the job done. Which seems to be more than you knotheads do.”

“What’s the hurry?” Fedoroff gibed. “We have eternity. We’re dead, remember.”

“We will indeed be dead if we’re caught, force-shields down, in anything like a real concentration of matter,” Reymont answered. “One atom per cubic meter—or less—could kill us. And with our tau, the nearest galactic clan is only days away.”

“So?”

“So are you absolutely certain, Engineer Fedoroff, that we won’t strike an embryo galaxy, family, clan… some enormous hydrogen cloud, still dark, still falling in on itself…at any instant?”

“At any megayear, you mean,” Fedoroff said. But he started aft from the main personnel lock. His gang followed.

It was, in truth, a flitting of ghosts. One had thought of space as black. But now one remembered that it had been full of stars. Any shape was silhouetted against suns, clusters, constellations, nebulae, sister galaxies; oh, the universe was pervaded with light! The *inner* universe. Here was worse than a dark background. Here was no background. None whatsoever. The squat, unhuman forms of men in space armor, the long curve of the hull, were seen as gleams, disconnected and fugitive, With acceleration ended, weight was ended also. Not even the slight differential-gravity of being in orbit existed. A man moved as if in an infinite dream of swimming, flying, falling. And yet… he remembered that this weightless body of his bore the mass of a mountain. Was there a real heaviness in his floating; or had the constants of inertia subtly changed, out here where the metric of space-time was flattened to nearly a straight line; or was it an illusion, spawned in the tomb of stillness which engulfed him? What was illusion? What was reality? Was reality?

Roped together, clinging with frantic magnetism to the ship's iron (curious, the horror one felt of getting somehow pitched loose—extinction would be the same as if that had happened in the lost little spaceways of the Solar System—but the thought of blazing across megayears as a stellar-scale meteorite was peculiarly lonely), the engineer detail made their way along the hull and the spidery framework which trailed it. Now that the accelerator system had been shut down, those ribs were all which held the generators together. They seemed terribly frail.

"Suppose we can't fix the decelerators," came a voice. "Do we go on? What happens to us? I mean, won't the laws be different, out on the edge of the universe? Won't we turn into something not human?"

"Space is finite," Reymont barked into the blackness. "'The edge of the universe' is a meaningless noise. And let's start by supposing that we can fix this stupid machine."

He heard a few oaths and grinned the faintest bit. When they halted and began to secure themselves individually to the framework that surrounded their task site, Fedoroff took the chance to lay his helmet against Reymont's and talk in private by conduction.

"Thanks, Constable," he said.

"What for?"

"Being such a prosaic bastard."

"Well, we have a prosaic job of repair to do. We may have come a long way, we may by now have outlived the race that produced us, but we haven't changed from a variety of proboscis monkey. Why take ourselves so mucking seriously?"

"Hm. I see why the Old Man said you should come along. All right, let's have a look at the problem here."

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Reymont opened the door to his cabin. Weariness made him careless. Bracing himself a trifle too hard against the bulkhead, he let go the handle and drifted free.

For a moment he cartwheeled in midair. Then he bumped into the opposite side of the corridor, pushed and darted back across. Once inside the cabin, he grasped a stanchion before shutting the door behind him.

At this hour, he had expected Chi-yuen to be asleep. But she floated a few centimeters off her bunk, a single line anchoring her amidst currents. As he entered, she returned her book to a drawer with a quickness that showed she hadn't really been paying attention to it.

"Not you, too?" Reymont asked. His question seemed loud. They had been so long accustomed to the engine pulse as well as the gravity of acceleration that free fall brimmed the ship with silence.

"What?" Her smile was tentative and troubled. She had had scant contact with him lately. There was too much for him to do under these changed conditions, organizing, ordering, cajoling, arranging, planning. He would come here to snatch what sleep he might.

"Have you also become unable to rest in zero gee?" he said.

“No. That is, I can. A strange, light sort of sleep, filled with dreams, but I seem fairly refreshed afterward.”

“Good,” he sighed. “Two more cases have developed.”

“Insomniac, do you mean?”

“Yes. Verging on nervous collapse. Every time they do drift off, you know, they wake again screaming. Nightmares. I’m not sure whether weightlessness alone does it to them, or if that’s only the last bit of breaking stress. Neither is Dr. Winblad. I was just conferring with him. He wanted my opinion on what to do, now that he’s running short of psycho-drugs.”

“What did you suggest?”

Reymont grimaced. “I told him who I thought unconditionally had to have them, and who might survive a while without.”

“The trouble isn’t simply the psychological effect, you realize,” Chi-yuen said. “It is the exhaustion. Pure physical exhaustion, from trying to do things in a gravityless environment.”

“Of course.” Reymont began unfastening his coverall, one leg hooked around a stanchion to hold him in place. “Quite unnecessary. The regular spacemen know how to handle themselves. I do. A few others. We don’t get worn out, trying to coordinate our muscles. It’s those groundlubber scientists who do.”

“How much longer, Charles?”

“In free fall? I don’t know. We appear to be bearing down on a galactic clan. Our forcefields have already been reactivated, as a precaution. Because we *might* enter a sufficient gas density at any moment for the jets to work. But we can’t be sure. Detailed observation is plain impossible, with the tau we now have.”

"But what is the maximum time before we enter that clan and start to have weight again?"

"Less than a week, ship's clocks. Can't estimate closer."

She sighed relief. "We can stand that. And then… then we will be making for our new home."

"Hope so," Reymont grunted. He stored his clothes, shivered a little and took out a pair of pajamas.

Chi-yuen started. "What do you mean by that? Don't you know?"

"Look, Ai-ling," he said in an exhausted tone, "we've come two or three billion lightyears from Earth. As far in time. We have no charts. No standard of measurement. Our tau is a number to guess at. We take spectrograms of entire galactic families, and assuming they are 'normal'—whatever that is! —we calculate tau from the frequency shift. But the probable error is huge. There are factors like absorption which simply aren't in our handbooks. Quite possibly some of the constants of physics are different enough out here to affect our results. How in hell's flaming name do you expect anyone to bring in an exact answer?"

"I'm sorry—"

"This has been explained to everyone," Reymont said. "Repeatedly. Are the officers to blame if passengers won't listen to their reports? Some of you are going to pieces. Some of you have barricaded yourselves with apathy, or religion, or sex, or whatever comes to hand, till nothing registers on your memories. Most of you—well, it was healthy to work on Nilsson's R & D, but that's become a defense reaction in its own right. Another way of focusing your attention so as to exclude the big bad universe. And now, when free fall prevents you carrying on, you too crawl into your nice hidey-holes." His voice lifted in anger. "Go ahead. Do what you want. The whole wretched lot of you. Only don't come and peck at me any longer. D' you hear?"

He yanked on the pajamas and started to climb into his bunk. Chi-yuen unbuckled her lifeline, pushed across to him, embraced him.

"Oh, darling," she whispered. "I'm sorry. You are so tired, are you not?"

"Been hard on us all," he said lethargically.

"Most on you." Her fingers traced the cheekbones standing out under taut skin, the deep lines, the sunken and bloodshot eyes. "Why don't you rest?"

"I'd like to."

She maneuvered his mass into a stretched-out position, clipped on his leash, and drew herself close. Her hair floated across his face, smelling of summers on Earth. "Do," she said. "You can. For you, isn't it good not to have weight?"

"M-m-m, yes. Ai-ling, you know Tetsuo Iwasaki pretty well. Do you think he can manage without tranquilizers? Sven Winblad and I weren't sure—"

"Hush." Her palm covered his mouth. "None of that."

"But—"

"No. I won't have it. The ship isn't going to fall apart if you get one decent night's sleep."

"Well...well...maybe not."

"Close your eyes. Let me stroke your face—so. Isn't that better already? Now think of nice things."

"Like what?"

"Have you forgotten? Think of home. No. Best not that, I suppose. Think of the home we are going to find. Blue sky. Warm bright sun, light falling through leaves, dappling the shade, blinking on a river; and the river flows, flows, flows, singing you to sleep—"

"Um-m-m."

She kissed him very lightly. "Our own house. A garden. Strange colorful flowers. Oh, but we will plant seeds from Earth too, roses, honeysuckle, rosemary for remembrance. Our children."

He stirred. The fret returned to him. "Wait a minute, we can't make personal commitments. Not yet. You might not want, uh, any given man. I'm fond of you, of course, but—"

She brushed his eyes shut again before he saw the pain on her. "We are daydreaming, Charles," she laughed low. "Do stop being so solemn and literal-minded. Just think about children, everyone's children, playing in a garden. Think about the river. Forests. Mountains. Birdsong. Peace."

He tightened an arm around her waist. "You're a good person," he murmured.

"So are you. A good person who needs to be cuddled. Would you like me to sing you to sleep?"

"Yes." His words were already becoming indistinct. "Please. I like Chinese cradle songs."

She continued smoothing his forehead while she drew breath.

The intercom circuit clicked shut. "Constable," said Telander's voice, "are you there?"

Reymont jerked awake. "Don't," Chi-yuen begged.

"Yes," Reymont said, "here I am."

"Would you come to the bridge? And don't alert anyone."

“Aye, aye. Right away.” Reymont unbuckled his lifeline and pulled the pajama top over his head.

“They could not give you five minutes, could they?” she said bitterly.

“Must be serious,” he rapped. “You’ll keep this confidential till you hear from me.” In a few motions he had donned coverall and shoes again and was on his way.

Telander and, surprisingly, Nilsson awaited him. The captain looked as if he had been struck in the belly. The astronomer was excited but had not lost his recent air of confidence and self-control. He clutched a bescribbled sheet of paper. “Navigation difficulty, eh?” Reymont deduced. “Where’s Boudreau?”

“This doesn’t concern him immediately,” Nilsson said. “I have been making my own observations with some of the new instruments. I have reached a, ah, disappointing conclusion.”

Reymont wrapped fingers around a grip and hung in the stillness, regarding them. The fluorolight cast the hollows of his face into shadow. The gray streaks which had lately appeared in his hair seemed vivid by contrast. “We can’t make that galactic clan ahead of us after all,” he said.

“That’s right.” Telander drooped.

“No, not strictly right,” Nilsson declared fussily. “We will pass through. In fact, we will pass through not just the general region, but a fair number of galaxies within the families that comprise the clan.”

“You can distinguish so much detail already?” Reymont wondered. “Boudreau can’t.”

“I told you I have some of the equipment working,” Nilsson said. “The precision seems even greater than hoped for when, ah, we instigated the project. Yes, I have a reasonably good map of the part of the clan which we might traverse. I have now finished making certain computations on that basis."

"Go on," Reymont said. "Once we get in where the jets have some matter to work on, why can't we brake?"

"We can. Of course we can. But our inverse tau is enormous. Remember, we acquired it by passing through the densest attainable portions of several galaxies, en route to interclan space. It was necessary. I do not dispute the wisdom of the decision. But the result is that this particular clan, at least, does not have enough material in it—not enough, I mean, within that conoidal volume which includes all our possible paths intersecting that clan, from this point we are now at—not enough for us to lose our entire velocity. We will emerge on the other side of the clan—after an estimated six months of ship's time under deceleration, mind you—with a tau that is still ten to the minus third or fourth. This, you can see, will make it quite impossible to reach another clan before we die of old age. Especially in view of the fact which we are currently experiencing, that no significant acceleration is possible between clans."

The pompous voice cut off, the beady eyes looked expectant. Reymont met that gaze rather than Telander's sick, gutted stare. "Why am I being told this, and not Lindgren?" he asked.

A tenderness made Nilsson, briefly, another man. "She works so very hard. What can she do here? I thought I had best let her sleep."

"Well, what can *I* do?"

"Give me…us…your advice," Telander said.

"But sir, you're the captain!"

"We've been over this ground before, Carl. I can, well, yes, I suppose I can make the decisions, issue the commands, order the routines, which will take us crashing on through space, more or less safely." Telander extended his hands. They trembled like autumn leaves. "More than that I can no longer do, Carl. I have not the strength left. You must tell our shipmates."

"Tell them we've failed?" Reymont grated. "Tell them, in spite of everything, we're damned to fly on till we go crazy and die? You don't want much of me, do you, Captain?"

"The news may not be that bad," Nilsson said.

Reymont snatched at him, missed and hung with the breath raw in his throat. "We have some hope?"

The little man spoke with a briskness that turned his pedantry into a sort of bugle call:

"Perhaps. I have no data yet. The distances are too vast. We cannot choose another galactic clan as being accessible to us, and aim for it. We would see it with too great an inaccuracy, and across too many millions of years of time. But I do believe we can base a hope on sheer statistics. Someplace, eventually, we could meet the right configuration. Either a large clan through whose galaxy densest portions we can lay a course; or else two or three clans, rather close to each other, more or less in a straight line, so that we can pass through them in succession. Do you see? If we could come upon something like that, we would be in good shape. We would be able to brake ourselves in a mere few years of ship's time."

"What are the odds?" Reymont's words rattled.

Nilsson shook his head. "I cannot say. But perhaps not too bad. This is a big and varied cosmos. If we continue sufficiently long, I should imagine we have a fair probability of encountering what we need."

"How long is sufficiently long?" Reymont lifted a hand. "Stop. Don't bother answering. It's on the order of billions of years. Tens of billions, maybe. That means we need a lower tau yet. A tau so low that we can actually circumnavigate the universe…in months, maybe in weeks. And that, in turn, means we can't start braking as we enter this clan up ahead. No. We accelerate again. After we've passed through—well, no doubt we'll have a shorter period of ship's time in free fall than this one was, until we strike another clan. Probably there, too, we'll find it advisable to accelerate, running tau still higher. We'll do so at every chance we get, from now till we see a journey's end we can make use of. Right?"

Telander shuddered. "Right," he said. "Can any of us endure it?"

"We'll have to," Reymont said. Now, once more, he spoke in the voice of command. "I'll figure out a tactful way to announce your news. I'll have the few men I can trust ready…no, not for violence. Ready with leadership, steadiness, encouragement. And we'll embark on a training program for freefall. No reason why it has to cause this much trouble. We'll teach every one of those groundlubbers how to handle himself in zero gee. How to sleep. By God, how to hope!" He smote his palms together with a pistol noise.

"Don't forget, we can depend on some of the women too," Nilsson said.

"Yes. Of course. Like Ingrid Lindgren."

"Like her indeed," Nilsson said gravely. "You know what she has done for me."

"M-hm. She is quite a girl, isn't she? I'm afraid you will have to go rouse her, Elof. We've got to get our cadre together—the unbreakables; the people who understand people—we must plan this thing. Start suggesting some names."

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"Oh, please," Jane Sadler had begged. "Come help him."

"You can't?" Reymont asked.

She shook her head. "I've tried. But I think I make matters worse. In his present condition. I being a woman." She flushed. "Know what I mean?"

"Well, I'm no psychologist," Reymont said. "But I'll see what I can do."

He left the bower where she had caught him in a private moment. The dwarfed trees, tumbling vines, grass and flowers made a place of healing for him. But he had noticed that comparatively few others went into that room any longer. Did it remind them of too much?

A zero-gee handball game bounced from corner to corner of the gymnasium. They were spacemen who played, though, and grimly rather than gleefully. Most of the civilians came here for little except their compulsory exercises and—-in a sporadic, uninterested fashion—their meals. No one hailed Reymont as he went by.

Further down the main corridor, a door stood open in a workshop. A lathe hummed within, a cutting torch glowed blue, several men were gathered around a bench discussing something. That was good. The instrument project continued. But it did so terminally, as mere refinement. Most of the labor was finished; cargo had been shifted. Number Two hold converted to an observatory, its haywire tangle neatened. There wasn't any work left for the bulk of Nilsson's team. There wasn't anything left except to abide.

Abruptly the ship quivered.

Weight grabbed at Reymont. He barely avoided falling to the deck. A metal noise toned through the hull, like a basso profundo gong. It was soon over. Free flight resumed. *Leonora Christine* had gone through another galaxy.

Such passages were becoming more frequent by the day. Would they never meet the right configuration to stop?

Well, of course you had to employ your force screens, either accelerating or decelerating. And you dared not decelerate till you were quite sure. But each spate of acceleration made the required conditions for coming to a halt that much more tight. So you went on. And inverse tau grew.

Reymont knocked on the cabin door he wanted. Hearing no reply, he tried it. Locked. But Sadler's adjoining door wasn't. He entered her cabin half and slid back the panel.

Johann Freiwald floated against his bunk. The husky shape was curled into an imitation of a fetus. But the eyes held awareness.

Reymont grasped a stanchion, encountered that stare, and said noncommittally, "I wondered why you weren't around, Hansi. Now I hear you aren't feeling well. Anything I can do for you?"

Freiwald grunted.

"Well, you can do a lot for me," Reymont said. "I need you pretty badly. You're a deputy. One of the half dozen who's stood by me—policeman, counselor, work-party boss, idea man—through this whole thing. You can't be spared yet."

Freiwald spoke as if with difficulty. "I shall have to be spared."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"I can't go on any more. That's all. I can't."

"Why not?" Reymont asked. "What jobs we have left to do aren't hard, physically. Anyhow, you're tough. Weightlessness never bothered you. You're a trained engineer, a pragmatist, a cheerful earthy soul. Not one of those self-appointed delicates who have to be coddled because their tender souls can't bear a long voyage." He sneered. "Or are you one?"

Freiwald stirred. His cheeks reddened a little. "I am a man," he said. "Not a robot. Eventually I start thinking."

"My friend, do you imagine we would have survived this far if the officers, at least, did not spend every waking hour thinking?"

"I don't mean your damned measurements, computations, course adjustments, equipment modifications. That's nothing but the instinct to stay alive. A lobster trying to climb out of a kettle has as much dignity. I ask myself, though, why? What are we doing? What does it mean?"

"Et tu, Brute." Reymont sighed.

Freiwald twisted about so that his gaze was straight into the constable's. "Because you are so insensitive…Do you know what year this is?"

"No. Neither do you. We have no way of determining it. And if you wonder what the year is on Earth, that's meaningless. Under these conditions, we have no simultaneity with—"

"Be quiet! I know that whole quacking. We have come many billion lightyears. We are rounding the curve of space. If we came back, this instant, to the Solar System, we would not find anything. The sun died long ago. It swelled and brightened till Earth was devoured; it became a variable, guttering like a candle in the wind; it sank away to a white dwarf, an ember, an ash. The human race is dead!"

"Not necessarily," Reymont said.

“Then it’s become something we could not comprehend. We are ghosts.” Freiwald’s lips trembled. He bit them till blood ran. “We hunt on and on, senselessly, meaninglessly—” Again acceleration thundered through the ship. “There,” he whispered. His eyes were wide, white-rimmed, as if with fear. “We passed through yet another galaxy. Another good part of a million years. To us, seconds.”

“Oh, not quite that,” Reymont said. “Our tau can’t be that low. We probably quartered a spiral arm.”

“Destroying how many worlds? Don’t tell me. I know the figures. We are not as massive as a star. But our energy—I think we could pass through the very heart of a sun and not notice.”

“Perhaps.”

“That’s part of our hell. That we’ve become a menace to—to—”

“Don’t say it. Don’t think it. Because it isn’t true. We’re interacting with dust and gas, nothing else. We do transit many galaxies, because galaxies lie comparatively close to each other in terms of their own size. Within a family, the members are about ten diameters apart, or even less. Individual stars within any single galaxy, though, that’s another situation entirely. Their diameters are such tiny fractions of a lightyear. In a nucleus, the most crowded part…well, the separation of two stars is still like the separation of two men, one at either end of a continent. A big continent. Asia, say.”

Freiwald looked away. “There is no more Asia,” he said. “No more anything.”

“There’s us,” Reymont said. “We’re alive, we’re real, we have hope. What more do you want? Some grandiose philosophical significance? Forget it. That’s a luxury. Our descendants will invent it, along with tedious epics about our heroism. We just have the sweat, tears, blood—” his grin flashed— "in short, the unglamorous bodily secretions. And what's so bad about that? Your trouble is, you think a combination of acrophobia, sensory deprivation and nervous strain is a metaphysical crisis. Myself, I don't look down on our lobster-like instinct to survive. I'm glad we have one."

Freiwald floated motionless.

Reymont clapped his shoulder. "I'm not belittling your difficulties," he said. "It *is* hard to keep going. Our worst enemy is despair; and it wrestles every one of us to the deck, every now and then."

"Not you," Freiwald said.

"Oh, yes," Reymont said. "Me too. I get my feet back, though. So will you."

"Well—" Freiwald scowled. "Maybe."

Reymont reached under his tunic and extracted a small flat flask. "Rank has its privileges," he smiled. "Here."

"What?"

"Scotch. The genuine article, not that witch's brew the Scandinavians think is an imitation. I prescribe a hearty dose for you, and for myself, as far as that goes. I'd enjoy a relaxed talk. Haven't had any such for longer than I can remember."

They had been at it for some while, and life was coming back in Freiwald's manner, when the intercom said with Ingrid Lindgren's voice: "Is Constable Reymont there?"

"Uh, yes," Freiwald said.

"Sadler told me so," the mate said. "Could you come to the bridge?"

“Urgent?” Reymont asked.

“Not really, I guess. The latest navigational sights seem to indicate a—a changing region of space. We may have to modify our cruising plan. I thought you might like to discuss it.”

“All right,” Reymont said.

“Me too,” the other man said. He looked at the flask, shook his head sadly and offered it back.

“No, you may as well finish it,” Reymont said. “Not alone, however. That’s bad, drinking alone. I’ll tell Sadler.”

“Well, now.” Freiwald genuinely laughed. “That’s kind of you.”

Emerging, closing the door behind him, Reymont glanced up and down the corridor. No one else was in sight. Then he sagged, eyes covered, body shaking. After a minute he drew a breath and started for the bridge.

Norbert Williams happened to come the other way. “Hello,” the chemist said.

“You’re looking cheerier than most,” Reymont remarked.

“Well, yes, I guess I am. Emma and I, we got talking, and we may have hit on yet another way to tell at a distance whether a planet has our type of life. A plankton-type population, you see, ought to impart certain thermal radiation characteristics to ocean surfaces; and given Doppler effect, making those frequencies something we can properly analyze—”

“Good. Do go ahead and work on it. And if you should co-opt a few others, that’d be a help.”

“Sure, we’ve already thought of that.”

“And would you pass the word, wherever she is, Sadler ought to go to her cabin? Her boy friend’s waiting with a surprise.”

Williams's guffaw followed Reymont on down the corridor.

But the companionway to the bridge was empty and still; and Lindgren stood watch alone. Her hands strained around the grips at the base of the viewscope. When she turned about at his entry, he saw that her face was quite without color.

He closed the door. "What's wrong?" he asked hushedly.

"You didn't let on to anyone?"

"No, of course not, when the business had to be grim. What is it?"

She tried to speak and could not.

"Is anyone else due at this meeting?" Reymont asked.

She shook her head. He went to her, anchored himself with a leg wrapped around a rail, and received her in his arms. "No," she said against his breast. "Elof and...Auguste Boudreau...they told me. They asked me to tell...the Old Man. They don't dare. Don't know how. I don't either." Her fingers clutched at him until the nails bit through his tunic. "Carl, what shall we do?"

He ruffled her hair, staring across her head, feeling her tension. Again the ship boomed and leaped; and soon again. The notes that rang through her were noticeably higher pitched than before. The draft from a ventilator felt cold. The metal around seemed to shrink inward.

"Go on," he said at last. "Tell me, *alskling.*"

"The universe—the whole universe—it's dying."

He made a noise in his gullet. Otherwise he waited. At length she was able to pull far enough back from him that they could look into each other's eyes. She said in a slurred, burned voice:

“Maybe the universe has a shorter lifespan than was thought. Or maybe we have traveled longer, in cosmic time, than we knew. Fifty, a hundred billion years. I don’t know. I just know what the others told me. What they have been observing. The galaxies we see are growing dimmer. As if, one by one, the stars are going out. And no new stars being formed. No new galaxies. The men weren’t sure. The observations are so hard to make. But they began to wonder. And then they started checking Doppler shifts more carefully. Especially of late, when we seem to pass through so many galaxies. They found that what they observed could not be explained by any tau that we can possibly have. Another factor had to be involved. The galaxies are getting more crowded. Space isn’t expanding any longer. It’s reached its limit and is collapsing inward again. Elof says the collapse will go on. And on. To the end.”

“We?” he asked.

“Who knows? Except that we can’t stop. We could, I mean. But by the time we did, nothing would be left…except blackness, burned-out suns, absolute zero, death, death. Nothing.”

“We don’t want that,” he said stupidly.

“No. What do we want? I think—Carl, shouldn’t we say good-by? All of us, to each other? A last party, with wine and candle-light. And afterward go to our cabins. You and I to ours. And say good night. We have morphine for everyone. And oh, Carl, we’re all so tired. It will be so good to sleep.”

Reymont drew her close to him again.

“Did you ever read *Moby Dick*?” she whispered. “That’s us. We’ve pursued the White Whale to the end of time. And now…that question. *What is man, that he should outlive his God?”*

Reymont put her from him, gently and went to the viewscope. Looking forth, he saw, for a moment, a galaxy pass. It must be only some ten-thousands of parsecs distant, for he saw it across the dark very large and clear. The form was chaotic. Whatever structure it had once had was disintegrated. No individual suns could be seen; those would have had to be giants, therefore young, and no young stars existed any more. The galaxy was a dull vague red, deepening at the fringes to the hue of clotted blood.

It drifted away from his sight. The ship went through another, storm-shaken by it, but of that one nothing was visible—nothing at all.

Reymont returned himself to the command bridge. Teeth gleamed in his visage. “No!” he said.

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From the dais of commons, he and she looked upon their assembled shipmates.

The gathering was seated, safety-harnessed into chairs whose legbolts had been secured at the proper places to the gym deck. Anything else would have been dangerous. Not that weightlessness prevailed yet. Between the tau which atoms now had with respect to *Leonora Christine*, and the compression of lengths in her own measurement because of that tau, and the dwindling radius of the cosmos itself, her ram jets drove her at a goodly fraction of one gee across the outermost deeps of interclan space. But oftener and oftener came spurts of higher acceleration as she passed through galaxies. They were too fast for the interior fields to compensate. They felt like the buffeting of waves; and each time the noise that sang in the hull was more shrill and windy.

Four dozen bodies hurled against each other could have meant broken bones or worse. But two people, trained and alert, could keep their feet with the help of a handrail. And it was needful that they do so. In this hour, folk must have before their gaze a man and a woman who stood together unbowed.

Ingrid Lindgren completed her relation. "—that is what is happening. We will not be able to stop before the death of the universe."

The muteness into which she had spoken seemed to deepen. A few women wept, a few men shaped oaths or prayers, but none was above a whisper. In the front row, Captain Telander bent his head and closed his eyes. The ship lurched in another squall. Sound passed by, throbbing, groaning, whistling.

Lindgren's hand briefly clasped Reymont's. "Now the constable has something to tell you," she said.

He trod a little forward. Sunken and bloodshot, his eyes appeared to regard them in ferocity. His tunic was wolf-gray, and besides his badge he wore his gun, the ultimate emblem. He said, quietly but with none of the mate's compassion:

"I know you think this is the end. We've tried and failed, and you think you should be left alone to make your peace with yourselves or your God. Well, I don't say you shouldn't do that. I have no idea what is going to happen to us. I don't believe anyone can predict any more. Nature is becoming too alien to our whole past experience of it. In honesty, I agree that our chances do look extremely poor.

"But I don't think they are zero, either. I think we have a duty—to the race that begot us, to the children we might yet bring forth ourselves—a duty to keep trying, right to the finish. For most of you, that won't involve more than continuing to live, continuing to stay sane. I'm well aware that that could be as hard a task as human beings ever undertook. The crew and the scientists who have relevant specialties will, in addition, have to carry on the work of the ship. Which may turn out to be pretty difficult.

"So make your peace. Interior peace. That's the only kind which ever existed anyway. The exterior fight goes on. I propose we wage it with no thought of surrender."

His words rang aloud: "I propose we go on to the next cycle of the cosmos."

That snatched them to alertness. Above a collective gasp and inarticulate cries, a few stridencies could be made out: "No! Lunacy!"—"Good man!"— "Impossible!"—"Blasphemy!"

Reymont drew his gun and fired. The shot shocked them into abrupt quiet.

He grinned into their faces. "Blank cartridge," he said. "Better than a gavel. We'll discuss this in orderly fashion. Captain Telander, will you preside?"

"No," said the Old Man faintly. "You. Please."

"Very well. Comments…ah, probably Navigator Boudreau should speak first."

The officer said, in an almost indignant voice: "The universe took somewhere between fifty and a hundred billion years to complete its expansion. It won't collapse in less time. Do you seriously believe we can acquire such a tau that we will outlive the cycle?"

"We can try," Reymont said. The ship trembled and bellied. "We gained a few more per cent right there. As matter gets denser, we naturally accelerate faster. Space itself is being pulled into a tighter and tighter curve. We couldn't circumnavigate the universe before, because it didn't last that long, in the form we knew it. But we should be able to circle the shrinking universe again and again. I'm no expert on theoretical cosmology, but I did check with Professor Chidambaran who knows more about the subject than anyone else aboard, and he agrees. Would you like to explain, sir?"

"Yes," the Indian said, rising. "Time as well as space must be taken into account. The characteristics of the whole continuum will change quite radically. In effect, our present exponential decrease of the tau factor in ship's time should itself increase to a much higher order." He paused. "At a rough estimate, I would say that the time we experience, from now to the ultimate collapse, will be less than three months."

Into the hush that followed, he added, "However, as I told Constable Reymont when he requested me to make this calculation, I do not see how we can survive. Apparently the theory of an oscillating universe is correct. It will be reborn. But first all matter and energy will be collected in a monobloc of ultimate density and temperature. We might pass through a star, at our present velocity, and be unharmed. But we can scarcely pass through the primordial nucleon. My personal suggestion is that we cultivate serenity." He sat down.

"Not a bad idea," Reymont said. "But I don't think that's the sole thing we should do. We should keep trying also. Bear in mind, nobody knows for sure what's going to happen. My guess is that everything will not get squeezed into a single zero-point something. That's the kind of oversimplification which helps our math along but never does tell a whole story. I think the central core of mass is bound to have an enormous hydrogen envelope, even before the explosion. The outer parts of that envelope may not be too hot, or radiant, or dense for us. Space will be so small, though, that we can circle around and around the monobloc as a kind of satellite. When it blows up and space starts to expand again, we'll naturally spiral out ourselves. I know this is a very sloppy way of phrasing, but it hints at what we can perhaps do…Mr. Williams?"

"I never thought of myself as a religious man," the chemist said. It was odd and disturbing to see him so humbled. "But this is too much. We're—well, what are we? Animals. My God—very literally, my God—we can't go on… having regular bowel movements…while creation happens!"

Beside him, Emma Glassgold looked startled, then angry. Her hand shot aloft.

"Speaking as a believer myself," she said, "I must say that that is sheer nonsense. I'm sorry, Norbert, dear, but it is. God made us the way He wanted us to be. There's nothing shameful about any part of His handiwork. I would like to watch Him fashion new stars and praise Him, as long as He sees fit that I should."

"Good for you!" Ingrid Lindgren called.

"I might add," Reymont said, "I being a man with no poetry in his soul, and I suspect no soul to keep poetry in…I might suggest you people look into yourselves and ask what psychological twists make you so unwilling to live through the moment where time begins again. Isn't there, down inside, some identification with—your parents, maybe? You shouldn't see your parents in bed, therefore you shouldn't see a new cosmos begotten. Now that doesn't make sense." He paused. "Of course, what's about to happen is awesome. But so was everything. Always. I never thought stars were more mysterious, or had more magic, than flowers."

Others wanted to talk. Eventually, everyone did. But their sentences threshed wearily around and around the point. It was not to no purpose.

They had to unburden themselves. But by the time they could finally adjourn the meeting, Reymont and Lindgren were near a collapse of their own.

They did seize a moment's low-speaking privacy, as the people broke into small groups and the ship roared with the hollow noise of her passage. "I can't move in with you tonight after all," Reymont said. "We'd have to help move personal gear, not to mention explaining to our cabin partners, and I'm so tired I can't. Tomorrow."

"No, not then, either," Ingrid Lindgren answered. "I'm sorry, but I've changed my mind."

Stricken, he exclaimed: "You don't want to?"

"You'll never know how much I want to, darling. But can we risk it? The emotional balance is so fragile. Anything might let chaos loose in anyone of us. Suppose Elof or Ai-ling took it hard that we left...left now, when death is so near. The despair, maybe the suicide of a single person could bring the whole ship down in hysteria." She gripped both his hands. "Afterward, of course. When we're safe. I'll never let you go then."

"We may never be safe," he said. "Chances are we won't. I want you back before we die."

"And I want you. But we can't. We mustn't. They depend on you. Absolutely. You're the only man who can lead us through what lies ahead. You've given me enough strength that I can help you a little. But even so... Carl, it was never easy to be a king."

She wheeled and walked quickly from him.

Leonora Christine shouted, shuddered, and leaped. Space flamed around her, a firestorm, hydrogen kindled to fluorescence by that supernal sun which was forming at the heart of existence, which burned brighter and brighter as the galaxies rained down into it. The gas hid the central travail behind sheets, banners and spears of radiance, aurora, flame, lightning. Forces, unmeasurably vast, tore through and through the atmosphere: electric, magnetic, gravitational, nuclear fields; shock waves bursting across megaparsecs; tides and currents and cataracts. On the fringes of creation, through billion year cycles which passed as moments, the ship of man flew.

Flew.

There was no other word. As far as humanity was concerned, or the most swiftly computing and reacting of machines, she fought a hurricane—but such a hurricane as had not been known since last the stars were melted together and hammered afresh.

"Yah-h-h!" screamed Aeropilot Lenkei, and rode the ship down the trough of a wave whose crest shook loose a foam of supernovae. The haggard men on the steering bridge with him stared into the screen that had been built. What raged in it was not reality—present reality transcended any picturing or understanding—but a representation of exterior forcefields. It burned and roiled and spewed great sparks and globes. It bellowed in the metal of the ship, in flesh and skulls.

"Can't you stand any more?" Reymont shouted from his own seat. "Barrios, relieve him."

The other flyboat man shook his head. He was too stunned, too beaten by the hour of his own previous watch.

"Okay." Reymont unharnessed himself. "I'll try. I've handled a lot of different types of craft." No one heard him through the fury around, but all saw him fight across the pitching, whirling deck, against two full gravities. He took the auxiliary control chair, on the opposite side of Lenkei from Barrios, and laid his mouth close to the pilot's ear. "Phase me in."

Barrios nodded. Together their hands moved across the control board.

They must hold *Leonora Christine* well away from the growing monobloc, whose radiation would surely kill them; at the same time, they must stay where the gas was so dense that tau could continue to decrease for them, turning these final phoenix begayears into hours; and they must keep the ship riding safely through a chaos that, did it, ever strike her full on, would rip her into nuclear particles. No computers, no instruments, no precedents might guide them. It must be done on instinct and trained reflex.

Slowly, Reymont entered the pattern, until he could steer alone. The rhythms of rebirth were wild, but they were there. Ease on starboard…vector at nine o'clock low…now *push* that thrust!…brake a little here…don't let her broach…swing wide of the flame if you can…Thunder brawled. The air was sharp with ozone, and cold.

The screen blanked. An instant later, every fluoropanel in the ship turned simultaneously ultraviolet and infrared, and darkness plunged down. Those who lay harnessed in aloneness, throughout the hull, heard invisible lightnings walk down the corridors. Those on command bridge, pilot bridge, engine room, who manned the ship, felt a heaviness greater than planets—they could not move, nor stop a movement once begun—and then felt a lightness such that their bodies began to break asunder—and this was a change in inertia itself, in every constant of nature as space-time-matter-energy under went its ultimate convulsion—for a moment infinitesimal and infinite, men, women, ship and death were one.

It passed, so swiftly that they were not certain it had ever been. Light came back and outside vision. The storm grew fiercer. But now through it, seen distorted so that they appeared to be blue-white firedrops that broke into sparks as they flew, now came nascent galaxies.

The monobloc had exploded. Creation had begun.

Reymont went over to deceleration. *Leonora Christine* started slowly to slow; and she flew out into a reborn light.

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Boudreau and Nilsson nodded at each other. They chuckled. "Yes, indeed," the astronomer said.

Reymont looked restlessly around the clutter of meters and apparatus which was the observatory. "Yes, what?" he demanded. He jerked one thumb at a screen which offered a visual display. Space swarmed with little dancing incandescences. "I can see for myself. The galaxies are still close together. Most of them are still nothing but clouds of hydrogen. And hydrogen is still quite thick between them. But what of it?"

"Computation on the basis of data," Nilsson said mysteriously. "We felt you deserved, as well as needed, to hear in confidence, so that you might be the one who makes the announcement."

"Well?"

"Never mind details," Boudreau said. "This result came out of the problem you set us, to find which directions the matter was headed in, and which directions the antimatter. You recall, we were able to do this by tracing the paths of plasma masses through the magnetic fields of the universe as a whole. And so this vessel is safely into the matter half of the plenum.

“Now in the course of making these studies, we collected and processed an astonishing amount of data. And here is what else we have learned. The cosmos is new, in some respects disordered. Things have not yet sorted themselves out. Within a short range of us, as such distances go, are material complexes—galaxies and proto-galaxies—with every possible velocity.

“We can use that fact to our advantage. That is, we can pick whatever clan, family, individual galaxy we want to make our goal—pick in such a way that we can arrive with zero relative speed at any point of its development that we choose. Within fairly wide limits, anyhow. We couldn’t get to a galaxy which is more than about ten billion years old by the time we arrived; not unless we wanted to approach it circuitously. Nor can we overhaul any before it is about one billion years old. But otherwise, we can choose what we like.

“And…whatever we elect, the maximum shipboard time required to arrive, braked, will be no longer than a few weeks!”

Reymont said an amazed obscenity.

“You see,” Nilsson added, “we can select a galaxy whose velocity is almost identical with ours.”

“Oh, yes,” Reymont muttered. “I can see that much.

But I’m not used to having luck in our favor.”

“Not luck,” Nilsson said. “Given an oscillating universe, this development was inevitable. Or so we perceive by hindsight. We need merely use the fact.

"Best you decide on our goal," he urged. "Now. Those other idiots, they would wrangle for hours, if you put it to a vote. And every hour means untold cosmic time lost, which narrows our choices. If you will tell us what you want, we'll plot an appropriate course, and the ship can start off very shortly with that vector. The expedition will accept any *fait accompli* you hand them, and thank you for it. You know that."

Reymont ran a hand through his hair. It was quite gray, and his tone was always flat with weariness. "What we want is a suitable planet," he said.

"Yes," Nilsson agreed. "May I suggest a planet—a system—of the same approximate age as Earth had? Say, four or five billion years? It seems to take about so long for a fair probability of the kind of biosphere we like having evolved. That is, we could live in a Mesozoic type of environment, I suppose, but we would rather not."

"Seems reasonable," Reymont nodded. "How about metals, though?"

"Ah, yes. We want a planet as rich in heavy elements as Earth was. Not too much less, or an industrialized civilization will be hard to establish. Not too much more, or we could find numerous areas where the soil is metal-poisoned. Since higher elements are formed in the earlier generations of stars, we should look for a galaxy that will be as old, at rendezvous, as ours was."

"No," Reymont said. "Younger."

"Eh?" Boudreau blinked.

"We can probably find a planet like Earth, also with respect to metals, in a young galaxy," Reymont said. "A globular cluster ought to have had plenty of supernovae in its early stages, which ought to have enriched the interstellar medium, so that G-type suns forming later would have about the same composition as Sol. As we enter our target galaxy, let's scout for such a cluster.

"But supposing we end up on a planet less well endowed with iron and uranium than Earth was...that won't matter. We have the technology to make do with light alloys and organics. We have hydrogen fusion for power.

"The important thing is that we be just about the first intelligent race alive."

They stared at him.

He smiled one-sidedly. "I'd like us to have our pick of planets, when we get around to interstellar colonization," he said. "And I'd like us to become the—oh, the elders. Not imperialists; that idea's ridiculous; but the people who were there first, and know their way around, and are worth learning from. Never mind what shape the younger races have. Who cares? But let's make this, as early as possible, a human galaxy, in the deepest sense of the word 'human.' Maybe even a human universe.

"I think we've earned that right."

-16-

That *Leonora Christine* took less than a month to find her new home was partly good fortune, but also due forethought.

The new-born atoms had burst outward with a random distribution of velocities. Thus, in the course of mega-and begayears, they formed hydrogen clouds which attained distinct individualities. While they drifted apart, these clouds condensed into sub-clouds—which, under the eons-long action of manifold forces, differentiated themselves into separate families, then separate galaxies, then individual suns.

But inevitably, in the early stages, exceptional situations occurred. Galaxies were as yet near to each other. They still contained anomalous groups. And so they exchanged matter. A large star cluster, for example, might form within one galaxy, but having more than escape velocity, might cross to another (with suns forming in it meanwhile) that could capture it.

Zeroing in on her destination, *Leonora Christine* kept watch for such a cluster: one whose speed she could easily match. And, as she entered its domain, she looked for a star of the right characteristics, spectral and velocital. To nobody's surprise, the nearest one had planets.

She might then, as originally planned, have gone by at high speed, making observations while she passed through the system. But Reymont said otherwise. For this once, let a chance be taken. The odds weren't so bad. Measurements made across lightyears with the newest instruments and techniques developed aboard ship gave some reason to believe that a certain child of that yellow sun might offer a good home for men.

If not—a year would have been lost, the year needed to approach lightspeed again with respect to the entire galaxy. But if there actually was a planet such as lived in memory, two years would have been gained.

The gamble seemed worthwhile. Given twenty-five fertile couples, an extra two years meant an extra half hundred ancestors for the future race.

Leonora Christine found her world, that very first time.

-17-

On a hill that viewed wide across a beautiful valley, a man stood with his woman.

Here was not New Earth. That would have been too much to expect. The river far below them was tinted gold with tiny life and ran through meadows whose many-fronded growth was blue. Trees looked as if they were feathered, in shades of the same color, and the wind set certain blossoms in them to chiming. It bore scents which were like cinnamon, and iodine, and horses, and nothing for which men had a name. On the opposite side lifted stark palisades, black and red, fanged with crags, where flashed the horns of a glacier.

Yet the air was warm; and humankind could thrive here. Enormous above river and ridges, towered clouds which shone silver in the sun.

Ingrid Lindgren said, “You mustn’t leave her, Carl. Not in so final a way.”

“What are you talking about?” Reymont retorted. “We can’t leave each other. None of us can. Ai-ling understands you’re something unique to me. But so is she, in her own way. So are we all, everyone to everyone else. Aren’t we? After what we’ve been through together?”

“Yes. It’s only—I never thought to hear such words from you, Carl, darling.”

He laughed. “What did you expect?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Something harsh and unyielding. Even cruel.”

“The time for that is over,” he said. “We’ve got where we were going. Now we have to start fresh.”

“Also with each other?” she asked, a little teasingly.

“Yes. Of course. We’ll need to take from the past what’s good, and forget what was bad. Like…well, the whole question of jealously simply isn’t relevant. We need to share our genes around as much as possible. Judas! Fifty of us to start a whole intelligent species again! So your worry about someone being hurt, or left out, or any such thing—it doesn’t arise. With all the work ahead of us, personalities have no importance whatsoever.”

He pulled her to him and chuckled down at her. “Not that we can’t tell the universe that Ingrid Lindgren is the loveliest object in it,” he said, threw himself down under a tall old tree, and tugged her hand. “Come here. I told you we were going to take a holiday.”

Steely scaled, with a skirling along its wings, passed overhead one of those creatures called dragons.

Lindgren joined Reymont, but hesitantly. “I don’t know if we should, Carl,” she said.

“Why not?” he asked, surprised.

“So much to do.”

“Construction, planting, everything’s coming along fine. We can well afford to loaf a bit.”

“But…all right,” she said, the words hard and unwillingly brought forth. “Let’s face the fact. Kings get no holidays.”

“What are you babbling about?” Reymont lounged back against the rough, sweet-scented bole and rumpled her hair, which was bright beneath the young sun. After dark, there would be three moons to shine upon her, and more stars in the sky than men had known before.

“You,” she said. “They look to you, the man who saved them, the man who dared survive, they look to you for—”

He interrupted her in the most enjoyable way.

“Carl!” she protested.

“Do you mind?”

“No. Certainly not. On the contrary. But—I mean, your work—”

“My work,” he said, “is my share of the community’s job. No more and no less. As for any other position: if nominated I will not run; if elected I will not serve.”

She looked at him with a kind of horror. “You can’t mean that!”

“I sure as hell can.” he answered. For a moment he turned serious again. “Once a crisis is past, once people manage for themselves…what better can a king do than lay down his crown?”

Then he laughed and made her laugh with him, and they were merely human. Which was enough.

A MESSAGE IN SECRET

-1-

Seen on approach, against crystal darkness and stars crowded into foreign constellations, Altai was beautiful. More than half the northern hemisphere, somewhat less in the south, was polar cap. Snowfields were tinged rosy by the sun Krasna; naked ice shimmered blue and cold green. The tropical belt, steppe and tundra, which covered the remainder, shaded from bronze to tarnished gold, here and there the quicksilver flash of a big lake. Altai was ringed like Saturn, a tawny hoop with subtle rainbow iridescence flung spinning around the equator, three radii out in space. And beyond were two copper-coin moons.

Captain Sir Dominic Flandry, field agent, Naval Intelligence Corps of the Terrestrial Empire, pulled his gaze reluctantly back to the spaceship's bridge. "I see where its name came from," he remarked. *Altai* meant *Golden* in the language of the planet's human colonists; or so the Betelgeusean trader who passed on his knowledge electronically to Flandry had insisted. "But Krasna is a misnomer for the sun. It isn't really red to the human eye. Not nearly as much as your star, for instance. More of an orange-yellow, I'd say."

The blue visage of Zalat, skipper of the battered merchant vessel, twisted into the grimace which was his race's equivalent of a shrug. He was moderately humanoid, though only half as tall as a man, stout, hairless, clad in a metal mesh tunic. "I zuppoze it was de, you zay, contrazt." He spoke Terrestrial Anglic with a thick accent, as if to show that the independence of the Betelgeusean System—buffer state between the hostile realms of Terra and Merseia—did not mean isolation from the mainstream of interstellar culture.

Flandry would rather have practiced his Altaian, especially since Zalat's Anglic vocabulary was so small as to limit conversation to platitudes. But he deferred. As the sole passenger on this ship, of alien species at that, with correspondingly special requirements in diet, he depended on the captain's good will. Also, the Betelgeuseans took him at face value. Officially, he was only being sent to re-establish contact between Altai and the rest of mankind. Officially, his mission was so minor that Terra didn't even give him a ship of his own, but left him to negotiate passage as best he might...So, let Zalat chatter.

"After all," continued the master, "Altai was firzt colonized more dan zeven hoondert Terra-years a-pazt: in de verry dawn, you say, of interztellar travel. Little was known about w'at to eggzpect. Krazna muzt have been deprezzingly cold and red, after Zol. Now-to-days, we have more aztronautical zophiztication."

Flandry looked to the blaze of space, stars and stars and stars. He thought that an estimated four million of them, included in that vague sphere called the Terrestrial Empire, was an insignificant portion of this one spiral arm of this one commonplace galaxy. Even if you added the other empires, the sovereign suns like Betelgeuse, the reports of a few explorers who had gone extremely far in the old days, that part of the universe known to man was terrifyingly small. And it would always remain so.

"Just how often do you come here?" he asked, largely to drown out silence.

"About onze a Terra-year," answered Zalat. "However, dere is ot'er merchantz on dis route. I have de fur trade, but Altai alzo produzes gemz, mineralz, hides, variouz organic productz, even dried meatz, w'ich are in zome demand at home. Zo dere is usually a Betelgeusean zhip or two at Ulan Baligh."

"Will you be here long?"

"I hope not. It iz a tediouz plaze for a non-human. One pleasure houze for uz haz been eztablizhed, but—" Zalat made another face. "Wid de diztur-banzez going on, fur trapping and caravanz have been much hampered. Lazt time I had to wait a ztandard mont' for a full cargo. Diz time may be worze."

Oh-oh, thought Flandry. But he merely asked aloud: "Since the metals and machinery you bring in exchange are so valuable, I wonder why some Altaians don't acquire spaceships of their own and start trading."

"Dey have not dat kind of zivilization," Zalat replied. "Remember, our people have been coming here for lezz dan a zentury. Before den Altai was izolated, onze de original zhipz had been worn out. Dere was never zo great an interezt among dem in re-eztablizhing galactic contact az would overcome de handicap of poverty in metalz w'ich would have made zpazezship building eggzpenzive for dem. By now, might-be, zome of de younger Altaian malez have zome wizh for zuch an enterprize. But lately de Kha Khan has forbidden any of his zubjectz from leaving de planet, eggzept zome truzted and verry cloze-mout' perzonal reprezentatives in de Betelgeuzean Zyztem. Dis prohibition is might-be one reazon for de inzurrectionz."

"Yeh." Flandry gave the ice fields a hard look. "If it were my planet, I think I'd look around for an enemy to sell it to."

And still I'm going there, he thought. *Talk about your unsung heroes—! Though I suppose, the more the Empire cracks and crumbles, the more frantically a few of us have to scurry around patching it. Or else the Long Night could come in our own sacrosanct lifetimes.*

And in this particular instance, his mind ran on, *I have reason to believe that an enemy is trying to buy the planet.*

-2-

Where the Zeya and the Talyma, broad shallow rivers winding south-ward over the steppes from polar snows, met at Ozero Rurik, the city named Ulan Baligh was long ago founded. It had never been large, and now the only permanent human settlement on Altai had perhaps 20,000 residents. But there was always a ring of encampments around it, tribesmen come to trade or confer or hold rites in the Prophet's Tower. Their tents and trunks walled the landward side of Ulan Baligh, spilled around the primitive spaceport, and raised campfire smoke for many kilometers along the indigo lakeshore.

As the spaceship descended, Captain Flandry was more interested in something less picturesque. Through a magnifying viewport in the after turret, to which he had bribed his way, he saw that monorail tracks encircled the city like spider strands; that unmistakable launchers for heavy missiles squatted on them; that some highly efficient modern military aircraft lazed on grav repulsors in the sky; that barracks and emplacements for an armored brigade were under construction to the west, numerous tanks and beetlecars already prowling on guard; that a squat building in the center of town must house a negagrav generator powerful enough to shield the entire urban area.

That all of this was new.

That none of it came from any factories controlled by Terra.

"But quite probably from our little green chums," he murmured to himself. "A Merseian base here, in the buffer region, outflanking us at Cataw-rayannis…Well, it wouldn't be decisive in itself, but it would strengthen their hand quite a bit. And eventually, when their hand looks strong enough, they're going to fight."

He suppressed a tinge of bitterness at his own people, too rich to spend treasure in an open attack on the menace—most of them, even, denying that any menace existed, for what would dare break the Pax Terrestria? After all, he thought wryly, he enjoyed his furloughs Home precisely because Terra was decadent.

But for now, there was work at hand. Intelligence had collected hints in the Betelgeuse region: traders spoke of curious goings-on at some place named Altai; the archives mentioned a colony far off the regular space lanes, not so much lost as overlooked; inquiry produced little more than this, for Betelgeusean civilians like Zalat had no interest in Altaian affairs beyond the current price of angora pelts.

A proper investigation would have required some hundreds of men and several months. Being spread horribly thin over far too many stars, Intelligence was able to ship just one man to Betelgeuse. At the Terran Embassy, Flandry received a slim dossier, a stingy expense account, and orders to find what the devil was behind all this. After which, overworked men and machines forgot about him. They would remember when he reported back, or if he died in some spectacular fashion; otherwise, Altai might well lie obscure for another decade.

Which could be a trifle too long, Flandry thought.

He strolled with elaborate casualness from the turret to his cabin. It must not be suspected on Altai what he had already seen: or, if that information leaked out, it must absolutely not be suspected that *he* suspected these new installations involved more than suppressing a local rebellion. The Khan had been careless about hiding the evidence, presumably not expecting a Terran investigator. He would certainly not be so careless as to let the investigator take significant information home again.

At his cabin, Flandry dressed with his usual care. According to report, the Altaians were people after his own heart: they liked color on their clothes, in great gobs. He chose a shimmerite blouse, green embroidered vest, purple trousers with gold stripe tucked into tooled-leather half boots, crimson sash and cloak, black beret slanted rakishly over his sleek seal-brown hair. He himself was a tall well-muscled man; his long face bore high cheekbones and straight nose, gray eyes, neat mustache. But then, he patronized Terra's best cosmetic biosculptor.

The spaceship landed at one end of the concrete field. Another Betelgeusean vessel towered opposite, confirming Zalat's claims about the trade. Not precisely brisk—maybe a score of ships per standard year—but continuous, and doubtless by now important to the planet's economy.

As he stepped out the debarkation lock, Flandry felt the exhilaration of a gravity only three-fourths that of Home. But it was quickly lost when the air stung him. Ulan Baligh lay at eleven degrees north latitude. With an axial tilt about like Terra's, a wan dwarf sun, no oceans to moderate the climate, Altai knew seasons almost to the equator. The northern hemisphere was approaching winter. A wind streaking off the pole sheathed Flandry in chill, hooted around his ears, and snatched the beret from his head.

He grabbed it back, swore, and confronted the portmaster with less dignity than he had planned. "Greeting," he said as instructed; "may peace dwell in your *yurt*. This person is named Dominic Flandry, and ranges Terra, the Empire."

The Altaian blinked narrow black eyes, but otherwise kept his face a mask. It was a wide, rather flat countenance, but not purely mongoloid: hook nose, thick close-cropped beard, light skin bespoke caucasoid admixture as much as the hybrid language. He was short, heavy-set, a wide-brimmed fur hat was tied in place, his leather jacket was lacquered in an intricate design, his pants were of thick felt and his boots fleece-lined. An old-style machine pistol was holstered at his left side, a broad-bladed knife on the right.

"We have not had such visitors—" He paused, collected himself, and bowed. "Be welcome, all guests who come with honest words," he said ritually. "This person is named Pyotr Gutchluk, of the Kha Khan's sworn men." He turned to Zalat. "You and your crew may proceed directly to the yamen. We can handle the formalities later. I must personally conduct so distinguished a…a guest to the palace."

He clapped his hands. A couple of servants appeared, men of his own race, similarly dressed and similarly armed. Their eyes glittered, seldom leaving the Terran; the woodenness of their faces must cover an excitement which seethed. Flandry's luggage was loaded on a small electro-truck of antique design. Pyotr Gutchluk said, half inquiringly, "Of course so great an *orluk* as yourself would prefer a *varyak* to a *tulyak*."

“Of course,” said Flandry, wishing his education had included those terms.

He discovered that a varyak was a native-made motorcycle. At least, that was the closest Terran word. It was a massive thing on two wheels, smoothly powered from a bank of energy capacitors, a baggage rack aft and a machine-gun mount forward. It was steered with the knees, which touched a crossbar. Other controls were on a manual panel behind the windscreen. An outrigger wheel could be lowered for support when the vehicle was stationary or moving slowly. Pyotr Gutchluk offered a goggled crash helmet from a saddlebag and took off at 200 kilometers an hour.

Flandry, accelerating his own varyak, felt the wind come around the screen, slash his face and nearly drag him from the saddle. He started to slow down. But—*Come now, old chap. Imperial prestige, stiff upper lip, and so on drearily.* Somehow he managed to stay on Gutchluk’s tail as they roared into the city.

Ulan Baligh formed a crescent, where the waters of Ozero Rurik cut a bay into the flat shore. Overhead was a deep-blue sky, and the rings. Pale by day, they made a frosty halo above the orange sun. In such a light, the steeply upcurving red tile roofs took on the color of fresh blood. Even the ancient gray stone walls beneath were tinged faint crimson. All the buildings were large, residences holding several families each, commercial ones jammed with tiny shops. The streets were wide, clean-swept, full of nomads and the wind. Gutchluk took an overhead road, suspended from pylons cast like dragons holding the cables in their teeth. It seemed an official passageway, nearly empty save for an occasional varyak patrol.

It also gave a clear view of the palace, standing in walled gardens: a giant version of the other houses but gaudily painted and colonnaded with wooden dragons. The royal residence was, however, overshadowed by the Prophet's Tower. So was everything else.

Flandry understood from vague Betelgeusean descriptions that most of Altai professed a sort of Moslem-Buddhist synthesis, codified centuries ago by the Prophet Subotai. The religion had only this one temple, but that was enough. A sheer two kilometers it reared up into the thin hurried air, as if it would spear a moon. Basically a pagoda, blinding red, it had one blank wall facing north. No, not blank either, but a single flat tablet on which, in a contorted Sino-Cyrillic alphabet, the words of the Prophet stood holy forever. Even Flandry, with scant reverence in his heart, knew a moment's awe. A stupendous will had raised that spire above these plains.

The elevated road swooped downward again. Gutchluk's varyak slammed to a halt outside the palace. Flandry, taller than any man of Altai, was having trouble with his steering bar. He almost crashed into the wrought-bronze gate. He untangled his legs and veered in bare time, a swerve that nearly threw him. Up on the wall, a guard leaned on his portable rocket launcher and laughed. Flandry heard him and swore. He continued the curve, steered a ring around Gutchluk so tight that it could easily have killed them both, slapped down the third wheel and let the cycle slow itself to a halt while he leaped from the saddle and took a bow.

"By the Ice People!" exclaimed Gutchluk. Sweat shone on his face. He wiped it off with a shaky hand. "They breed reckless men on Terra!"

"Oh, no," said Flandry, wishing he dared mop his own wet skin. "A bit demonstrative, perhaps, but never reckless."

Once again he had occasion to thank loathed hours of calisthenics and judo practice for a responsive body. As the gates opened—Gutchluk had used his panel radio to call ahead—Flandry jumped back on his varyak and putt-putted through under the guard's awed gaze.

The garden was rocks, arched bridges, dwarf trees, and mutant lichen. Little that was Terran would grow on Altai. Flandry began to feel the dryness of his own nose and throat. This air snatched moisture from him as greedily as it did heat. He was more grateful for the warmth inside the palace than he wished to admit.

A white-bearded man in a fur-trimmed robe made a deep bow. "The Kha Khan himself bids you welcome, Orluk Flandry," he said. "He will see you at once."

"But the gifts I brought—"

"No matter now, my lord." The chamberlain bowed again, turned and led the way down arched corridors hung with tapestries. It was very silent: servants scurried about whispering, guards with modern blasters stood rigid in dragon-faced leather tunics and goggled helmets, tripods fumed bitter incense. The entire sprawling house seemed to crouch, watchful.

I imagine I have upset them somewhat, thought Flandry. *Here they have some cozy little conspiracy—with beings sworn to lay all Terra waste, I suspect—and suddenly a Terran officer drops in, for the first time in five or six hundred years. Yes-s-s.*

So what do they do next? It's their move.

-3-

Oleg Yesukai, Kha Khan of All the Tribes, was bigger than most Altaians, with a long sharp face and a stiff reddish beard. He wore gold rings, a robe thickly embroidered, silver trim on his fur cap, but all with an air of impatient concession to tedious custom. The hand which Flandry, kneeling, touched to his brow, was hard and muscular; the gun at the royal waist had seen use. This private audience chamber was curtained in red, its furniture inlaid and grotesquely carved; but it also held an ultramodern Betelgeusean graphone and a desk buried under official papers.

"Be seated," said the Khan. He himself took a low-legged chair and opened a carved-bone cigar box. A smile of sorts bent his mouth. "Now that we've gotten rid of all my damned fool courtiers, we need no longer act as if you were a vassal." He took a crooked purple stogie from the box. "I would offer you one of these, but it might make you ill. In thirty-odd generations, eating Altaian food, we have probably changed our metabolism a bit."

"Your majesty is most gracious." Flandry inhaled a cigarette of his own and relaxed as much as the straightbacked furniture permitted.

Oleg Khan spoke a stockbreeder's pungent obscenity. "Gracious? My father was an outlaw on the tundra at fifteen." (He meant local years, a third again as long as Terra's. Altai was about one A.U. distant from Krasna, but the sun was less massive than Sol.) "At thirty he had seized Ulan Baligh with 50,000 warriors and deposited old Tuli Khan naked on the artic snows: so as not to shed royal blood, you understand. But he never would live here, and all his sons grew up in the *ordu,* the encampment, as he had done, practiced war against the Tebtengri as he had known war, and mastered reading, writing, and science to boot. Let us not bother with graciousness, Orluk Flandry. I never had time to learn any."

The Terran waited passive. It seemed to disconcert Oleg, who smoked for a minute in short ferocious drags, then leaned forward and said, "Well, why does your government finally deign to notice us?"

"I had the impression, your majesty," said Flandry in a mild voice, "that the colonists of Altai came this far from Sol in order to escape notice."

"True. True. Don't believe that rat crud in the hero songs. Our ancestors came here because they were weak, not strong. Planets where men could settle at all were rare enough to make each one a prize, and there was little law in those days. By going far and picking a wretched icy desert, a few shiploads of Central Asians avoided having to fight for their home. Nor did they plan to become herdsmen. They tried to farm, but it proved impossible. Too cold and dry, among other things. They could not build an industrial, food-synthesizing society either: not enough heavy metals, fossil fuels, fissionables. This is a low-density planet, you know. Step by step, over generations, with only dim traditions to guide them, they were forced to evolve a nomadic life. And that was suited to Altai; that worked, and their numbers increased. Of course, legends have grown up. Most of my people still believe Terra is some kind of lost Utopia and our ancestors were hardy warriors." Oleg's rust-colored eyes narrowed upon Flandry. He stroked his beard. "I've read enough, thought enough, to have a fair idea of what your Empire is and what it can do. So—why this visit, at this exact moment?"

"We are no longer interested in conquest for its own sake, your majesty," said Flandry. True, as far as it went. "And our merchants have avoided this sector for several reasons. It lies far from heartland stars; the Betelgeuseans, close to their own home, can compete on unequal terms; the risk of meeting some prowling warship of our Merseian enemies is unattractive. There has, in short, been no occasion, military or civilian, to search out Altai." He slipped smoothly into prevarication gear. "However, it is not the Emperor's wish that any members of the human family be cut off. At the very least, I bring you his brotherly greetings." (That was subversive. It should have been “fatherly.” But Oleg Khan would not take kindly to being patronized.) “At most, if Altai wished to rejoin us, for mutual protection and other benefits, there are many possibilities which could be discussed. An Imperial resident, say, to offer help and advice—”

He let the proposal trail off, since in point of fact a resident’s advice tended to be, “I suggest you do thus and so lest I call in the Marines.”

The Altaian king surprised him by not getting huffy about sovereign status. Instead, amiable as a tiger, Oleg Yesukai answered: “If you are distressed about our internal difficulties, pray do not be. Nomadism necessarily means tribalism, which usually means feud and war. I already spoke of my father’s clan seizing planetary leadership from the Nuro Bator. We in turn have rebellious *gurkhans.* As you will hear in court, that alliance called the Tebtengri Shamanate is giving us trouble. But such is nothing new in Altain history. Indeed, I have a firmer hold over more of the planet than any Kha Khan since the Prophet’s day. In a little while more I shall bring every last clan to heel.”

“With the help of imported armament?” Flandry elevated his brows a millimeter. Risky though it was to admit having seen the evidence, it might be still more suspicious not to. And indeed the other man seemed unruffled. Flandry continued, “The Imperium would gladly send a technical mission.”

“I do not doubt it.” Oleg’s response was dry.

“May I respectfully ask what planet supplies the assistance your majesty is now receiving?”

“Your question is impertinent, as well you know. I do not take offense, but I decline to answer.” Confidentially: “The old mercantile treaties with Betel-geuse guarantee monopolies in certain exports to their traders. This other race is taking payment in the same articles. I am not bound by oaths sworn by the Nuro Bator dynasty, but at present it would be inexpedient that Betelgeuse discover the facts."

It was a good spur-of-the-moment lie: so good that Flandry hoped Oleg would believe he had fallen for it. He assumed a fatuous Look-Mom-I'm-a-man-of-the-world smirk. "I understand, great Khan. You may rely on Terrestrial discretion."

"I hope so," said Oleg humorously. "Our traditional punishment for spies involves a method to keep them alive for days after they have been flayed."

Flandry's gulp was calculated, but not altogether faked. "It is best to remind your majesty," he said, "just in case some of your less well-educated citizens should act impulsively, that the Imperial Navy is under standing orders to redress any wrong suffered by any Terran national anywhere in the universe."

"Very rightly," said Oleg. His tone made clear his knowledge that that famous rule had become a dead letter, except as an occasional excuse for bombarding some obstreperous world unable to fight back. Between the traders, his own study missions sent to Betelgeuse, and whoever was arming him—the Kha Khan had become as unmercifully well-informed about galactic politics as any Terran aristocrat.

Or Merseian. The realization was chilling. Flandry had perforce gone blind into his assignment. Only now, piece by piece, did he see how big and dangerous it was.

"A sound policy," continued Oleg. "But let us be perfectly frank, Orluk. If you should suffer, let us say, accidental harm in my dominions—and *if* your masters should misinterpret the circumstances, though of course they would not—I should be forced to invoke assistance which is quite readily available."

Merseia isn't far, thought Flandry, *and Intelligence knows they've massed naval units at their closest base. If I want to hoist Terran vintages again, I'd better start acting the fool as never before in a gloriously misspent life.*

Aloud, a hint of bluster: "Betelgeuse has treaties with the Imperium, your majesty. They would not interfere in a purely interhuman dispute!" And then, as if appalled at himself: "But surely there won't be any. The, uh, conversation has, uh, taken an undesirable turn. Most unfortunate, your majesty! I was ah, am interested in, er, unusual human colonies, and it was suggested to me by an archivist that—"

And so on and so on.

Oleg Yesukai grinned.

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Altai rotated once in 35 hours. The settlers had adapted, and Flandry was used to postponing sleep. He spent the afternoon being guided around Ulan Baligh, asking silly questions which he felt sure his guides would relay to the Khan. The practice of four or five meals during the long day—his were offered in the town houses of chieftains belonging to Clan Yesukai—gave him a chance to build up the role of a young Terran fop who had wangled this assignment from an uninterested Imperium, simply for a lark. A visit to one of the joyhouses, operated for transient nomads, helped reinforce the impression. Also, it was fun.

Emerging after sunset, he saw the Prophet's Tower turned luminous, so that it stood like a bloody lance over brawling, flicker-lit streets. The tablet wall was white, the words thereon in jet: two kilometers of precepts for a stern and bitter way of life. “I say,” he exclaimed, “we haven’t toured that yet. Let’s go.”

The chief guide, a burly gray warrior leathered by decades of wind and frost, looked uneasy. “We must hasten back to the palace, Orluk,” he said. “A banquet is being prepared.”

“Oh, fine. Fine! Though I don’t know how much of an orgy I’m in any shape for after this bout. Eh, what?” Flandry nudged the man’s ribs with an indecent thumb. “Still, a peek inside, really I must. It’s unbelievable, that skyscraper, don’t you know.”

“We must first cleanse ourselves.”

A young man added bluntly: “In no case could it be allowed. You are not an initiate, and there is no holier spot in all the stars.”

“Oh, well, in that case—Mind if I photograph it tomorrow?”

“Yes,” said the young man. “It is not forbidden, perhaps, but we could not be responsible for what the ordinary tribesman who saw you with your camera might do. None but the Tebtengri would look on the Tower with anything but reverent eyes.”

“Teb—”

“Rebels and heathen, up in the north.” The older man touched brow and lips, a sign against evil. “Magic-workers at Tengri Nor, traffickers with the Ice People. It is not well to speak of them, only to exterminate them. Now we must hasten, Orluk.”

“Oh, yes. Yes. To be sure. Yes, indeed.” Flandry scrambled into the tulyak, an open motor carriage with a dragon figurehead.

As he was driven to the palace, he weighed what he knew in an uncomforting balance. Something was going on, much bigger than a local war. Oleg Khan had no intention Terra should hear about it. A Terran agent who actually learned a bit of truth would not go home alive; only a well-born idiot could safely be allowed return passage. Whether or not Flandry could convince the Altaians he was that idiot, remained to be seen. It wouldn't be easy, for certainly he must probe deeper.

Furthermore, my lad, if somehow you do manage to swirl your cloak, twiddle your mustache, and gallop off to call an Imperial task force, Oleg may summon his friends. They are obviously not a private gun-selling concern, as he wants me to think; all Altai couldn't produce enough trade goods to pay for that stuff. So, if the friends get here first and decide to protect this military investment of theirs, there's going to be a fight. And with them dug in on the surface, as well as cruising local space, they'll have all the advantages. The Navy won't thank you, lad, if you drag them into a losing campaign.

He kindled a fresh cigarette and wondered miserably why he hadn't told HQ he was down with Twonk's Disease.

The valet assigned to him, at his guest suite in the palace, was a little puzzled by Terran garments. Flandry spent half an hour choosing his own ensemble. At last, much soothed, he followed an honor guard, who carried bared daggers in their hands, to the banquet hall, where he was placed at the Khan's right.

There was no table. A great stone trough stretched the length of the hall, a hundred men sitting cross-legged on either side. Broth, reminiscent of wonton soup but with a sharp taste, was poured into it from wheeled kettles. When next the Khan signaled, the soup was drained through traps, spigots flushed the trough clean, and even less identifiable solid dishes were shoveled in. Meanwhile cups of hot, powerfully alcoholic herb tea were kept filled, a small orchestra caterwauled on pipes and drums, and there were some fairly spectacular performances by varyak riders, knife dancers, acrobats, and marksmen. At the meal's end, an old tribal bard stood up and chanted lays; a plump and merry little man was summoned from the bazaars downtown to tell his original stories; gifts from the Khan were given every man present; and the affair broke up. Not a word of conversation had been spoken.

Oh, well, I'm sure everyone else had a hilarious time, Flandry grumbled to himself.

Not quite sober, he followed his guards back to his apartment. The valet bade him goodnight and closed the thick fur drapes which served for internal doors.

There was a radiant globe illuminating the room, but it seemed feeble next to the light filling a glazed balcony window. Flandry opened this and looked out in wonder.

Beneath him lay the darkened city. Past twinkling red campfires, Ozero Rurik stretched in blackness and multiple moonshivers, out to an unseen horizon. On his left the Prophet's Tower leaped up, a perpetual flame crowned with unwinking winter-brilliant stars. Both moons were near the full, ruddy discs six and eight times as broad to the eye as Luna, haloed by ice crystals. Their light drenched the plains, turned the Zeya and Talyma into ribbons of mercury. But the rings dominated all else, bridging the southern sky with pale rainbows. Second by second, thin fire-streaks crossed heaven up there, as meteoric particles from that huge double band hurtled into the atmosphere.

Flandry was not much for gaping at landscapes. But this time it took minutes for him to realize how frigid the air was.

He turned back to the comparative warmth of his suite. As he closed the window, a woman entered from the bedroom.

Flandry had expected some such hospitality. He saw that she was taller than most Altaians, with long blue-black hair and lustrous tilted eyes of a greenish hue rare on this planet. Otherwise a veil and a gold-stiffened cloak hid her. She advanced quickly, till she was very near him, and he waited for some token of submission.

Instead, she stood watching him for close to a minute. It grew so still in the room that he heard the wind on the lake. Shadows were thick in the corners, and the dragons and warriors on the tapestries appeared to stir.

Finally, in a low uneven voice, she said: "Orluk, are you indeed a spy from the Mother of Men?"

"Spy?" Flandry thought, horrified, about *agents provocateurs.* "Good cosmos, no! I mean, that is to say, nothing of the sort!"

She laid a hand on his wrist. The fingers were cold, and clasped him with frantic strength. Her other hand slipped the veil aside. He looked upon a broad fair-skinned face, delicately arched nose, full mouth, and firm chin: handsome rather than pretty. She whispered, so fast and fiercely he had trouble following:

"Whatever you are, you must listen! If you are no warrior, then give the word when you go home to those who are. I am Bourtai Ivanskaya of the Tumurji folk, who belonged to the Tebtengri Shamanate. Surely you have heard speak of them, enemies of Oleg, driven into the north but still at war with him. My father was a *noyon,* a division commander, well known to Juchi Ilyak. He fell at the battle of Rivers Meet, last year, where the Yesukai men took our whole ordu. I was brought here alive, partly as a hostage—" A flare of haughtiness: "As if that could influence my people!—and partly for the Kha Khan's harem. Since then I have gained a little of his confidence. More important, I have my own connection now, the harem is always a center of intrigue, nothing is secret from it for very long, but much which is secret begins there—"

"I know," said Flandry. He was stunned, almost overwhelmed, but could not help adding: "Bedfellows make strange politics."

She blinked incomprehension and plunged on: "I heard today that a Terran envoy was landed. I thought perhaps, perhaps he was come, knowing a little of what Oleg Yesukai readies against the Mother of Men. Or if he does not, he must be told! I found what woman would be lent him, and arranged the substitution of myself. Ask me not how! I have wormed secrets which give me power over more than one harem guard—it is not enough to load them with antisex hormone on such a tour of duty! I had the right. Oleg Khan is my enemy and the enemy of my dead father, all means of revenge are lawful to me. But more, worse, Holy Terra lies in danger. Listen, Terra man—"

Flandry awoke. For those few seconds, it had been so fantastic he couldn't react. Like a bad stereodrama, the most ludicrous cliches, he was confronted with a girl (it would be a girl, too, and not simply a disgruntled man) who babbled her autobiography as prologue to some improbable revelation. Now suddenly he understood that this was real: that melodrama does happen once in a while. And if he got caught playing the hero, any role except comic relief, he was dead.

He drew himself up, fended Bourtai off, and said in haste: "My dear young lady, I have not the slightest competence in these matters. Furthermore, I've heard far more plausible stories from far too many colonial girls hoping for a free ride to Terra. Which, I assure you, is actually not a nice place at all for a little colonial girl without funds. I do not wish to offend local pride, but the idea that a single backward planet could offer any threat to the Imperium would be funny if it were not so yawnworthy. I beg you, spare me."

Bourtai stepped back. The cloak fell open. She wore a translucent gown which revealed a figure somewhat stocky for Terran taste but nonetheless full and supple. He would have enjoyed watching that, except for the uncomprehending pain on her face.

"But, my lord Orluk," she stammered, "I swear to you by the Mother of us both—"

You poor romantic, it cried in him, *what do you think I am, a god? If you're such a yokel you never heard of planting microphones in a guest room, Oleg Khan is not. Shut up before you kill us both!*

Aloud, he got out a delighted guffaw. "Well, by Sirius, I do call this thoughtful. Furnishing me with a beautiful spy atop everything else! But honestly, darling, you can drop the pretense now. Let's play some more adult games, eh, what?"

He reached out for her. She writhed free, ran across the room, dodged his pursuit and almost shouted through swift tears: "No, you fool, you blind brainless cackler, you will listen! You will listen if I must knock you to the floor and tie you up—and tell them, tell when you come home, ask them only to send a real spy and learn for themselves!"

Flandry cornered her. He grabbed both flailing wrists and tried to stop her mouth with a kiss. She brought her forehead hard against his nose. He staggered back, half blind with the pain, and heard her yelling: "It is the Merseians, great greenskinned monsters with long tails, the Merseians, I tell you, who come in secret from a secret landing field. I have seen them myself, walking these halls after dark, I have heard from a girl to whom a drunken *orkhon* babbled, I have crept like a rat in the walls and listened myself. They are called Merseians, the most terrible enemy your race and mine have yet known, and—"

Flandry sat down on a couch, wiped blood off his mustache, and said weakly: "Never mind that for now. How do we get out of here? Before the guards come to shoot us down, I mean."

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Bourtai fell silent, and he realized he had spoken in Anglic. He realized further that they wouldn't be shot, except to prevent escape. They would be questioned, gruesomely.

He didn't know if there were lenses as well as microphones in the walls. Nor did he know if the bugs passed information on to some watchful human, or only recorded data for study in the morning. He dared assume nothing but the former.

Springing to his feet, he reached Bourtai in one bound. She reacted with feline speed. A hand, edge on, cracked toward his larynx. He had already dropped his head, and took the blow on the hard top of his skull. His own hands gripped the borders of her cloak and crossed forearms at her throat. Before she could jab him in the solar plexus, he yanked her too close to him. She reached up thumbs, to scoop out his eyeballs. He rolled his head and was merely scratched on the nose. After the last buffet, that hurt. He yipped, but didn't let go. A second later, she went limp in his strangle.

He whirled her around, got an arm lock, and let her sag against him. She stirred. So brief an oxygen starvation had brought no more than a moment’s unconsciousness. He buried his face in her dark flowing hair, as if he were a lover. It had a warm, somehow summery smell. He found an ear and breathed softly:

“You little gristlehead, did it ever occur to you that the Khan is suspicious of me? That there must be listeners? Now our forlorn chance is to get out of here. Steal a Betelgeusean spaceship, maybe. First, though, I must pretend I am arresting you, so they won’t come here with too much haste and alertness for us. Understand? Can you play the part?”

She grew rigid. He felt her almost invisible nod. The hard young body leaning on him eased into a smoothness of controlled nerve and muscle. He had seldom known a woman this competent in a physical emergency. Unquestionably, Bourtai Ivanskaya had military training.

She was going to need it.

Aloud, Flandry huffed: “Well, I’ve certainly never heard anything more ridiculous! There aren’t any Merseians around here. I checked very carefully before setting out. Wouldn’t want to come across them, don’t you know, and spend maybe a year in some dreary Merseian jail while the *pater* negotiated my release. Eh, what? Really now, it’s perfect rot, every word.” He hemmed and hawed a bit. “I think I’d better turn you in, madam. Come along, now, no tricks!”

He marched her out the door, into a pillared corridor. One end opened on a window, twenty meters above a night-frozen fishpond. The other stretched into dusk, lit by infrequent bracketed lamps. Flandry hustled Bourtai down that side. Presently they came to a downward-sweeping staircase. A pair of sentries, in helmets, leather jackets, guns and knives, stood posted there. One of them aimed and barked: “Halt! What would you?”

“This girl, don’t you know,” panted Flandry. He nudged Bourtai, who gave some realistic squirmings. “Started to babble all sorts of wild nonsense. Who’s in charge here? She thought I’d help her against the Kha Khan. Imagine!”

“What?” A guardsman trod close.

“The Tebtengri will avenge me!” snarled Bourtai. “The Ice People will house in the ruin of this palace!”

Flandry thought she was overacting, but the guards both looked shocked. The nearer one sheathed his blaster. “I shall hold her, Orluk,” he said. “Boris, run for the commander.”

As he stepped close, Flandry let the girl go. With steel on his pate and stiff leather on his torso, the sentry wasn’t very vulnerable. Except—Flandry’s right hand rocketed upward. The heel of it struck the guard under the nose. He lurched backward, caromed off the balustrade, and flopped dead on the stairs. The other, half-turned to go, spun about on one booted heel. He snatched for his weapon. Bourtai put a leg behind his ankles and pushed. Down he went, Flandry pounced. They rolled over, clawing for a grip. The guard yelped. Flandry saw Bourtai over his opponent’s shoulder. She had taken the belt off the first warrior and circled about with the leather in her hands. Flandry let his enemy get on top. Bourtai put the belt around the man’s neck, a knee between his shoulder-blades, and heaved.

Flandry scrambled from below. “Get their blasters,” he gasped. “Here, give me one. Quick! We’ve made more racket than I hoped. Do you know the best way to escape? Lead on, then!”

Bourtai raced barefoot down the steps. Her goldcloth cloak and frail gown streamed behind her, insanely, unfitting for the occasion. Flandry came behind, one flight, two flights.

Boots clattered on marble. Rounding yet another spiral curve, Flandry met a squad of soldiers quick-stepping upward. The leader hailed him: “Do you have the evil woman, Orluk?”

So there had been a continuous listener. Of course, even surrendering Bourtai, Flandry could not save his own skin. Harmless fop or no, he had heard too much.

The squad’s eyes registered the girl’s blaster even as their chief spoke. Someone yelled. Bourtai fired into the thick of them. Ionic lightning crashed. Flandry dropped. A bolt sizzled where he had been. He fired, wide-beam, the energy too diluted to kill even at this range but scorching four men at once. As their screams lifted, he bounced back to his feet, overleaped the fallen front line, stiff-armed a warrior beyond, and hit the landing.

From here, a bannister curled grandly to the ground floor. Flandry whooped, seated himself, and slid. At the bottom was a sort of lobby, with glass doors opening on the garden. The moons and rings were so bright that no headlights shone from the half-dozen varyaks roaring toward this entrance. Mounted guardsmen, attracted by the noise of the fight—Flandry stared around. Arched windows flanked the doors, two meters up. He gestured to Bourtai, crouched beneath one and made a stirrup of his hands. She nodded, soared to the sill, broke glass with her gun butt, and fired into the troop. Flandry took shelter behind a column and blasted loose at the remnant of the infantry squad, stumbling down the stairs in pursuit. Their position hopelessly exposed to him, they retreated from sight.

A varyak leaped through the doors. The arms of the soldier aboard it shielded his face against flying glass. Flandry shot before the man had uncovered himself. The varyak, sensitively controlled, veered and went down across the doorway. The next one hurtled over it. The rider balanced himself with a trained body, blazing away at the Terran. Bourtai dropped him from above.

She sprang down unassisted. “I got two more outside,” she said. “Another pair are lurking, calling for help—”

“We’ll have to chance them. Where are the nearest gates?”

“They will be closed! We cannot burn through the lock before—”

“I’ll find a means. Quick, up on this saddle. Slowly, now, out the door behind me. Right the putt-putts of those two men you killed and stand by.” Flandry had already dragged a corpse from one varyak (not without an instant’s compassionate wondering what the man had been like alive) and set the machine back on its wheels. He sprang to the seat and went full speed out the shattered door.

So far, energy weapons had fulfilled their traditional military function, giving more value to purposeful speed of action than mere numbers. But there was a limit: two people couldn’t stave off hundreds for very long. He had to get clear.

Flame sought him. He lacked skill to evade such fire by tricky riding. Instead, he plunged straight down the path, crouched low and hoping he wouldn’t be pierced. A bolt burned one leg, slightly but with savage pain. He reached the gloomy, high-arched bridge he wanted. His cycle snorted up and over. Just beyond the hump, he dropped off, relaxing muscles and cushioning himself with an arm in judoka style. Even so, he bumped his nose. For a moment, tears blinded him, and he used bad words. Then the two enemy varyaks followed each other across the bridge. He sprang up on the railing, unseen, and shot both men as they went by.

Vaguely, he heard an uproar elsewhere. One by one, the palace windows lit, until scores of dragon eyes glared into night. Flandry slid down the bridge, disentangled the heaped varyaks, and hailed Bourtai. “Bring the other machines!” She came, riding one and leading two more by tethers to the guide bars. He had felt reasonably sure that would be standard equipment; if these things were commonly used by nomads, there’d be times when a string of pack vehicles was required.

“We take two,” he muttered. Here, beneath an overleaning rock, they were a pair of shadows. Moonlight beyond made the garden one fog of coppery light. The outer wall cut that off, brutally black, with merlons raised against Altai’s rings like teeth. “The rest, we use to ram down the gates. Can do?”

“Must do!” she said, and set the varyak control panels. “Here. Extra helmets and clothing are always kept in the saddlebags. Put on the helmet, at least. The clothes we can don later.”

“We won’t need them for a short dash—”

“Do you think the spaceport is not now a-crawl with Yesukai men?”

“Oh, hell,” said Flandry.

He buckled on the headgear, snapped down the goggles, and mounted anew. Bourtai ran along the varyak line, flipping main switches. The riderless machines took off. Gravel spurted from their wheels into Flandry’s abused face. He followed the girl.

A pair of warriors raced down a cross path briefly stark under the moons and then eaten again by murk. They had not seen their quarry. The household troops must be in one classic confusion, Flandry thought. He had to escape before hysteria faded and systematic hunting was organized.

The palace gates loomed before him, heavy bars screening off a plaza that was death-white in the moon radiance. Flandry saw his varyaks only as meteoric gleams. Sentries atop the wall had a better view. Blasters thundered, machine guns raved, but there were no riders to drop from those saddles.

The first varyak hit with a doomsday clangor. It rebounded in four pieces. Flandry sensed a chunk of red-hot metal buzz past his ear. The next one crashed, and the bars buckled. The third smote and collapsed across a narrow opening. The fourth flung the gates wide. *"Now!"*

At 200 KPH, Bourtai and Flandry made for the gateway. They had a few seconds without fire from the demoralized men above them. Bourtai hit the toppled machines. Her own climbed that pile, took off, and soared halfway across the plaza. Flandry saw her balance herself, precise as a bird, land on two wheels and vanish in an alley beyond the square. Then it was his turn. He wondered fleetingly what the chances of surviving a broken neck were, and hoped he would not. Not with the Khan's interrogation chambers waiting. Whoops, bang, here we go! He knew he couldn't match Bourtai's performance. He slammed down the third wheel in midair. He hit ground with less violence than expected: first-class shock absorbers on this cycle. An instant he teetered, almost rolling over. He came down on his outrigger. Fire spattered off stone behind him. He retracted the extra wheel and gunned his motor.

A glance north, past the Tower toward the spaceport, showed him grav-beam air-boats aloft, a hornet swarm. He had no prayer of hijacking a Betel-geusean ship. Nor was it any use to flee to Zalat in the yamen. Where, then, beneath these unmerciful autumnal stars?

Bourtai was a glimpse in moonlight, half a kilometer ahead of him down a narrow nighted street. He let her take the lead, concentrated grimly on avoiding accidents. It seemed like an eyeblink, and it seemed like forever, before they were out of the city and onto the open steppe.

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Wind lulled in long grasses, the whispering ran for kilometers, on and on beyond the world's edge, pale yellow-green in a thousand subtle hues rippled by the wind's footsteps. Here and there the spiky red of some frost-nipped bush thrust up; the grasses swirled about it like a sea. High and high overhead, incredibly high, an infinite vault full of wind and deep-blue chill, the sky reached. Krasna burned low in the west, dull orange, painting the steppe with ruddy light and fugitive shadows. The rings were an ice bridge to the south; northward the sky had a bleak greenish shimmer which Bourtai said was reflection off an early snowfall.

Flandry crouched in grasses as tall as himself. When he ventured a peek, he saw the airboat that hunted them. It spiraled lazy, but the mathematics guiding it and its cohorts wove a net around this planet. To his eyes, even through binoculars taken from a saddlebag, the boat was so far as to be a mere metallic flash; but he knew it probed for him with telescopes, ferrous detectors, infrared amplifiers.

He would not have believed he could escape the Khan's hundreds of searching craft this long. Two Altaian days, was it? Memory had faded. He knew only a fever dream of bounding north on furious wheels, his skin dried and bleeding from the air; sleeping a few seconds at a tune, in the saddle, eating jerked meat from the varyak supplies as he rode, stopping to refill canteens at a waterhole Bourtai had found by signs invisible to him.

He knew only how he ached, to the nucleus of his inmost cell, and how his brain was gritty from weariness.

But the plain was unbelievably huge, almost twice the land area of all Terra. The grass was often as high as this, veiling prey from sky-borne eyes. They had driven through several big herds, to break their trail; they had dodged and woven under Bourtai's guidance, and she had a hunter's knowledge of how to confuse pursuit.

Now, though, the chase seemed near its end.

Flandry glanced at the girl. She sat cross-legged, impassive, showing her own exhaustion just by the darkening under her eyes. In stolen leather clothes, hair braided under the crash helmet, she might have been a boy. But the grease smeared on her face for protection had not much affected its haughty good looks. The man hefted his gun. "Think he'll spot us?" he asked. He didn't speak low, but the blowing immensities around reduced all voices to nothing.

"Not yet," she answered. "He is at the extreme detector range, and cannot swoop down at every dubious flicker of instrument readings."

"So…ignore him and he'll go away?"

"I fear not." She grew troubled. "They are no fools, the Khan's troopers. I know that search pattern. He and his fellows will circle about, patrolling much the same territory until nightfall. Then, as you know, if we try to ride further, we must turn on the heaters of our varyaks or freeze to death. And that will make us a flame to the infrared spotters."

Flandry rubbed his smooth chin. Altaian garments were ridiculously short on him, so thank all elegant gods for antibeard enzyme! He wished he dared smoke. "What can we do?" he said.

She shrugged. “Stay here. There are well-insulated sleeping bags, which ought to keep us alive if we share a single one. But if the local temperature drops far enough below zero, our own breath and body radiation may betray us.”

“How close are we to your friends?”

Bourtai rubbed tired hazel eyes. “I cannot say. They move about, under the Khrebet and along the Kara Gobi fringe. At this time of year they will be drifting southward, so we are not so terribly far from one or another ordu, I suppose. Still, distances are never small on the steppe.” After a moment: “If we live the night, we can still not drive to find them. The varyaks’ energy cells are nigh exhausted. We shall have to walk.”

Flandry glanced at the vehicles, now battered and dusty beyond recognition. Wonderfully durable gadgets, he thought in a vague way. Largely handmade, of course, using small power tools and the care possible in a non-mercantile economy. The radios, though, were short range…No use getting wistful. The first call for Tebtengri help would bring that aircraft overhead down like a swooping falcon.

He eased himself to his back and let his muscles throb. The ground was cold under him. After a moment, Bourtai followed suit, snuggling close in somehow childlike trustfulness.

“If we do not escape, well, such is the space-time pattern,” she said, more clamly than he could have managed. “But if we do, what then is your plan, Orluk?”

“Get word to Terra, I suppose. Don’t ask me how.”

“Will not your friends come avenging when you fail to return?”

“No. The Khan need only tell the Betelgeuseans that I, regrettably, died in some accident or riot or whatever, and will be cremated with full honors.

It would not be difficult to fake: a blaster-charred corpse about my size, perhaps, for one human looks much like another to the untrained non-human. Word will reach my organization, and naturally some will suspect, but they have so much else to do that the suspicion will not appear strong enough to act on. The most they will do is send another agent like myself. And this time, expecting him, the Khan can fool him: camouflage the new installations, make sure our man talks only to the right people and sees only the right things. What can one man do against a planet?"

"You have done somewhat already."

"But I told you, I caught Oleg by surprise."

"You will do more," she continued serenely. "Can you not, for instance, smuggle a letter out through some Betelgeusean? We can get agents into Ulan Baligh."

"I imagine the same thought has occurred to the Khan. He will make sure no one he is not certain of has any contact with any Betelgeusean, and will search all export material with care."

"Write a letter in the Terran language."

"He can read that himself, if no one else."

"Oh, no." Bourtai raised herself on one elbow. "There is not a human on all Altai except yourself who reads the—what do you call it?—the Anglic. Some Betelgeuseans do, of course, but no Altaian has ever learned; there seemed no pressing reason. Oleg himself reads only Altaian and the principal Betelgeusean language. I know; he mentioned it to me one night recently." She spoke quite coolly of her past year. Flandry gathered that in this culture it was no disgrace to have been a harem slave: fortunes of war.

"Even worse," he said. "I can just see Oleg's agents permitting a document in an unknown alphabet to get out. In fact, from now until whenever they have me dead, I doubt if they will let anything they are not absolutely sure about come near a spaceship, or a spacefarer."

Bourtai sat up straight. Sudden, startling tears blurred her gaze. "But you cannot be helpless!" she cried. "You are from *Terra!"*

He didn't want to disillusion her. "We'll see." Hastily plucking a stalk of grass and chewing it: "This tastes almost like home. Remarkable similarity."

"Oh, but it is of Terran origin." Bourtai's dismay changed mercurially to simple astonishment that he should not know what was so everyday to her. "The first colonists here found the steppe a virtual desert—only sparse plant forms, poisonous to man. All other native life had retreated into the Arctic and Antarctic. Our ancestors mutated what seeds and small animals they had along, created suitable strains, and released them. Terrestroid ecology soon took over the whole unfrozen belt."

Flandry noticed once more that Bourtai's nomadic life had not made her a simple barbarian. Hm, it would be most interesting to see what a true civilization on wheels was like…if he survived, which was dubious…He was too tired to concentrate. His thoughts drifted off along a pattern of fact and deduction, mostly things he knew already.

Krasna was obviously an old sun, middle Population Two, drifted from the galactic nucleus into this spiral arm. As such, it—and its planets—were poor in the heavier elements, which are formed within the stars, scattered by novae and super-novae, and accumulated in the next stellar generation. Being smaller than Sol, Krasna had matured slowly, a red dwarf through most of its long existence.

Initially, for the first billion years or so, internal heat had made Altai more or less Terrestroid in temperature. Protoplasmic life had evolved in shallow seas, and probably the first crude land forms. But when moltenness and most radioactivity were used up, only the dull sun furnished heat. Altai froze. It happened slowly enough for life to adapt during the long period of change.

And then, while who knew how many megacenturies passed, Altai was ice-bound from pole to pole. An old, old world, so old that one moon had finally spiraled close and shattered to make the rings: so old, indeed, that its sun had completed the first stage of hydrogen burning and moved into the next. From now on, for the next several million years, Krasna would get hotter and brighter. At last Altai's seas, liquid again, would boil; beyond that, the planet itself would boil, as Krasna became nova; and beyond that the star would be a white dwarf, sinking toward ultimate darkness.

But as yet the process was only begun. Only the tropics had reached a temperature men could endure. Most of the water fled thence and snowed down on the still frigid polar quarters, leaving dry plains where a few plants struggled to re-adapt…and were destroyed by this invading green grass…

Flandry's mind touched the remote future of his own planet, and recoiled. A gelid breeze slid around him. He grew aware how stiff and chilly he was. And the sun not even set!

He groaned back to a sitting position. Bourtai sat calm in her fatalism. Flandry envied her. But it was not in him, to accept the chance of freezing —to walk, if he survived this night, over hundreds of parched kilometers, through cold strengthening hour by autumn hour.

His mind scuttered about, a trapped weasel seeking any bolthole. Fire, fire, my chance of immortality for a fire—*Hoy, there!*

He sprang to his feet, remembered the aircraft, and hit dirt again so fast that he bumped his bruised nose. The girl listened wide-eyed to his streaming, sputtering Anglic. When he had finished, she sketched a reverent sign. “I too pray the Spirit of the Mother that She guide us,” said Bourtai.

Flandry skinned his teeth in a grin. “I, uh, wasn’t precisely praying, my dear. No, I think I’ve a plan. Wild, but—now, listen—”

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Arghun Tiliksky thrust his face out of that shadow which blurred the ring of cross-legged men, into the scant sunlight trickling through a small window of the *kibitka.* “It was evil,” he declared sharply. “Nothing is more dreaded than a grass fire. And you set one! No luck can come from such a deed.”

Flandry studied him. The noyon of the Mangu Tuman was quite young, even for these times when few men of Tebtengri reached great age; and a dashing, gallant warrior, as everyone said and as he had proved in the rescue. But to some extent, Arghtin was the local equivalent of a prude.

“The fire was soon put out, wasn’t it?” asked the Terran mildly. “I heard from your scout, the Kha Khan’s aircraft swarmed there and tossed foam bombs down till the flames were smothered. Not many hectares were burned over.”

“In such tasks,” said Toghrul Vavilov, Gur-Khan of the tribe, “all Altaians are one.” He stroked his beard and traded bland smiles with Flandry: a kindred hypocrite. “Our scout needed but to carry a few foam bombs himself, and no enemy vessel would molest him. He observed them and returned here in peace.”

One of the visiting chieftains exclaimed: “Your noyon verges on blasphemy himself, Toghrul. Sir Dominic is from Terra! If a lord of Terra wishes to set a blaze, who dares deny him?”

Flandry felt he ought to blush, but decided not to. “Be that as it may,” he said, “I couldn’t think of any better plan. Not all the tribal leaders who have come to this—what do you call the meeting?—this *kurultai,* have heard just what happened. The girl Bourtai and myself were trapped with little power left in our varyaks, and the probability of freezing or starving in a few more days if we were not detected by infra-red that same night. So, soon after dark, I scurried about on foot, setting fires which quickly coalesced into one. The wind swept the flames from us—but the radiation of our varyak heaters was still undetectable against such a background! Since we could not be extremely far as negagrav flight goes from some ordu of the Shamanate, it seemed likely that at least one aerial scout would come near to investigate the fire. Therefore, after a while, we broke radio silence to call for help. Then we ducked and dodged, hunted by the gathering vessels of Oleg, somewhat screened by the heat and smoke… until a flying war party from the Mangu Tuman arrived, beat off the foe, and escaped with us before more of the enemy should arrive.”

“And so this council has been called,” added Toghrul Vavilov. “The chiefs of all our allied tribes must understand what we now face.”

“But the fire—” mumbled Arghun.

Eyes went through gloom to an old man seated under the window. Furs covered frail Juchi Ilyak so thickly that his bald parchment-skinned head looked disembodied. The Shaman stroked a wisp of white beard, blinked eyes that were still sharp, and murmured with a dry little smile: “This is not the time to dispute whether the rights of a man from Holy Terra override the Yassa by which Altai lives. The question seems rather, how shall we all survive in order to raise such legal quibbles at another date?”

Arghun tossed his reddish-black hair and snorted: “Oleg’s father, and the whole Nuru Bator dynasty before him, tried to beat down the Tebtengri.

But still we hold the northlands. I do not think this will change overnight.”

“Oh, but it will,” said Flandry in his softest voice. “Unless something is done, it will.”

He treated himself to one of the few remaining cigarettes and leaned forward so the light would pick out his features, exotic on this planet. He said: “Throughout your history, you have waged war, as you have driven your machines, with chemical power and stored solar energy. A few small, stationary nuclear generators at Ulan Baligh and the mines are all that your way of life demanded. Your economy would not have supported atomic war, even if feuds and boundary disputes were worth it. So you Tebtengri have remained strong enough to hold these subarctic pastures, though all other tribes were to ally against you. Am I right?”

They nodded. He continued: “But now Oleg Khan is getting help from outside. Some of his new toys I have seen with my own eyes. Craft which can fly flourishes around yours, or go beyond the atmosphere to swoop down again; battlecars whose armor your strongest chemical explosives cannot pierce; missiles to devastate so wide an area that no dispersal can save you. As yet, he has not much modern equipment. But more will arrive during the next several months, until he has enough to crush you. And, still worse, he will have allies that are not human.”

They stirred uneasily, some of them making signs against witchcraft. Only Juchi the Shaman remained quiet, watching Flandry with impassive eyes. A clay pipe in his hand sent bitter incense toward the roof. “Who are these creatures?” he asked calmly.

“Merseians,” said Flandry. “Another imperial race than man—and man stands in the path of their ambitions. For long now we have been locked with them, nominally at peace, actually probing for weaknesses, subverting, assassinating, skirmishing. They have decided Altai would make a useful naval base. Outright invasion would be expensive, especially if Terra noticed and interfered: and we probably would notice, since we watch them so closely. But if the Merseians supply Oleg with just enough help so that he can conquer the whole planet for them—do you see? Once he has done that, the Merseian engineers will arrive; Altaians will dig and die to build fortresses; this entire world will be one impregnable net of strongholds…and then Terra is welcome to learn what has been going on!"

"Does Oleg himself know this?" snapped Toghrul.

Flandry shrugged. "Insufficiently well, I imagine. Like many another puppet ruler, he will live to see the strings his masters have tied on him. But that will be too late. I've watched this sort of thing happen elsewhere.

"In fact," he added, "I've helped bring it about now and then—on Terra's behalf!"

Toghrul entwined nervous fingers. "I believe you," he said.

"We have all had glimpses, heard rumors…What is to be done? Can we summon the Terrans?"

"Aye—aye—call the Terrans, warn the Mother of Men—" Flandry felt how passion flared up in the scarred warriors around him. He had gathered that the Tebtengri had no use for Subotai the Prophet but built their own religion around a hard-boiled sort of humanistic pantheism. It grew on him how strong a symbol the ancestral planet was to them.

He didn't want to tell them what Terra was actually like these days. (Or perhaps had always been. He suspected men are only saints and heroes in retrospect.) Indeed, he dare not speak of sottish Emperors, venal nobles, faithless wives, servile commons, to this armed and burning reverence. *But luckily, there's a practical problem at hand.*

Terra is farther from here than Merseia," he said. "Even our nearest base is more distant than theirs. I don't believe any Merseians are on Altai at this moment, but surely Oleg has at least one swift spaceship at his disposal, to inform his masters if anything should go wrong. Let us get word Terra, and let Oleg learn this has happened, what do you think he'll do?" Flandry nodded, owlish. "Right, on the first guess! Oleg will send to that nearest Merseian base, where I know a heavy naval force is currently stationed. I doubt very much if the Merseians will write off their investment tamely. No, they will dispatch their ships at once, occupy various points, blast the Tebtengri lands with nuclear bombs, and dig in. It will not be as smooth and thorough a job as they now plan, but it will be effective. By the time a Terran fleet of reasonable size can get here, the Merseians will be fairly well entrenched. The most difficult task in space warfare is to get a strong enemy off a planet firmly held. It may prove impossible. But even if, thanks to our precipitating matters, the Terrans do blast the Merseians loose, Altai will have been made into a radioactive desert."

Silence clapped down. Men stared at each other, and back to Flandry, with a horror he had seen before and which was one of the few things it still hurt him to watch. He went on quickly:

"So the one decent objective for us is to get a secret message out. If Oleg and the Merseians don't suspect Terra knows, they won't hasten their program. It can be Terra, instead, which suddenly arrives in strength, seizes Ulan Baligh, establishes ground emplacements and orbited forts. I know Merseian strategy well enough to predict that, under those circumstances, they won't fight. It isn't worth it, since Altai cannot be used as an aggressive base against them." He should have said *will not;* but let these people make the heart-breaking discovery for themselves, that Terra's only real interest was to preserve a fat status quo.

Arghun sprang to his feet. As he crouched under the low ceiling, primness dropped from him. His young leonine face became a sun, he cried: "And Terra will have us! We will be restored to humankind!"

While the Tebtengri whooped and wept at that understanding, Flandry smoked his cigarette with care. After all, he thought, it needn't corrupt them. Not too much. There would be a small naval base, an Imperial governor, an enforced peace between all tribes. Otherwise they could live as they chose. It wasn't worth Terra's while to proselytize. What freedom the Altaians lost here at home, their young men would regain simply by having access to the stars. Wasn't that so? Wasn't it?

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Juchi the Shaman, who bound together all these fiefs, spoke in a whisper that pierced: "Let us have silence. We must weigh how this may be done."

Flandry waited till the men had seated themselves. Then he gave them a rueful smile. "That's a good question," he said. "Next question, please."

"The Betelgeuseans—" rumbled Toghrul.

"I doubt that," said another gur-khan. "If I were Oleg the Damned, I would put a guard around every individual Betelgeusean, as well as every spaceship, until all danger has passed. I would inspect every trade article, every fur or hide or smokegem, before it was loaded."

"Or send to Merseia at once," shivered someone else.

“No,” said Flandry. “Not that. We can be sure Merseia is not going to take such hazardous action without being fairly sure that Terra has heard of their project. They have too many commitments elsewhere.”

“Besides,” said Juchi, “Oleg Yesukai will not make himself a laughing stock before them—screaming for help because one fugitive is loose in the Khrebet.”

“Anyhow,” put in Toghrul, “he knows how impossible it is to smuggle such an appeal out! Those tribes not of the Shamanate may dislike the Yesu-kai tyranny, but they are still more suspicious of us, who traffic with the Ice Dwellers and scoff at that stupid Prophet. Even supposing one of them *would* agree to brand a hide for us, or slip a letter into a bale of pelts, and even supposing that did get past Oleg’s inspectors, the cargo might wait months to be loaded, months more in some Betelgeusean warehouse.”

“And we don’t have so many months, I suppose, before Oleg overruns you and the Merseians arrive as planned,” finished Flandry.

He sat for a while listening to their desperate chewing of impractical schemes. It was hot and stuffy in here. All at once he could take no more. He rose. “I need fresh air, and a chance to think, he said.

Juchi nodded grave dismissal. Arghun jumped up again. “I come too,” he said.

“If the Terran desires your company,” said Toghrul.

“Indeed, indeed.” Flandry’s agreement was absent-minded.

He went out the door and down a short ladder. The kibitka where the chiefs met was a large, covered truck, its box fitted out as austere living quarters. On top of it, as on all the bigger, slower vehicles, the flat black plates of a solar-energy collector were tilted to face Krasna and charge an accumulator bank. Such roofs made this wandering town, dispersed across the hills, seem like a flock of futuristic turtles.

The Khrebet was not a high range. Gullied slopes ran up, gray-green with thornbush and yellow with sere grass, to a glacial cap in the north. Downward swept a cold wind, whining about Flandry; he shivered and drew the coat, hastily sewn to his measure, tighter about him. The sky was pale today, the rings low and wan in the south, where the hills emptied into steppe.

As far as Flandry could see, the herds of the Mangu Tuman spread out under care of varyak-mounted boys. They were not cattle. Terra's higher mammals were hard to raise on other planets; rodents are tougher and more adaptable. The first colonists had brought rabbits along, which they mutated and cross-bred systematically. That ancestor could hardly be recognized in the cow-sized grazing beasts of today, more like giant dun guinea pigs than anything else. There were also separate flocks of bio-engineered ostriches.

Arghun gestured with pride.

"Yonder is the library," he said, "and those children seated nearby are being instructed."

Flandry looked at that kibitka. Of course, given microprint, you could carry thousands of volumes along on your travels; illiterates could never have operated these ground vehicles or the nega-grav aircraft watchful overhead. Certain other trucks—including some trains of them—must house arsenals, sickbay, machine tools, small factories for textiles and ceramics. Poorer families might live crowded in a single *yurt,* a round felt tent on a motor cart; but no one looked hungry or ragged. And it was not an impoverished nation which carried such gleaming missiles on flatbed cars, or operated such a flock of light tanks, or armed every adult. Considering Bourtai, Flandry decided that the entire tribe, male and female, must be a military as well as a social and economic unit. Everybody worked, and everybody fought, and in their system the proceeds were more evenly shared than on Terra.

“Where does your metal come from?” he inquired.

“The grazing lands of every tribe include some mines,” said Arghun. “We plan our yearly round so as to spend time there, digging and smelting—just as elsewhere we reap grain planted on the last visit, or tap crude oil from our wells and refine it. What we cannot produce ourselves, we trade with others to get.”

“It sounds like a virtuous life,” said Flandry.

His slight shudder did not escape Arghun, who hastened to say: “Oh, we have our pleasures, too, feasts, games and sports, the arts, the great fair at Kievka Hill each third year—” He broke off.

Bourtai came walking past a campfire. Flandry could sense her loneliness. Women in this culture were not much inferior to men; she was free to go where she would, and was a heroine for having brought the Terran here. But her family were slain and she was not even given work to do.

She saw the men and ran toward them. “Oh…what has been decided?”

“Nothing yet.” Flandry caught her hands. By all hot stars, she was a good-looking wench! His face crinkled its best smile. “I couldn’t see going in circles with a lot of men, hairy however well-intentioned, when I might be going in circles with you. So I came out here. And my hopes were granted.”

A flush crept up her high flat cheeks. She wasn't used to glibness. Her gaze fluttered downward. "I do not know what to say," she whispered.

"You need say nothing. Only be," he leered.

"No—I am no one. The daughter of a dead man...my dowry long ago plundered...And you are a Terran! It is not right!"

"Do you think your dowry matters?" said Arghun. His voice cracked.

Flandry threw him a surprised glance. At once the warrior's mask was restored. But for an instant, Flandry had seen why Arghun Tiliksky didn't like him.

He sighed. "Come, we had better return to the kurultai," he said.

He didn't release Bourtai, but tucked her arm under his. She followed mutely along. He could feel her tremble a little, through the heavy garments. The wind off the glacier ruffled a stray lock of dark hair.

As they neared the kibitka of the council, its door opened. Juchi Ilyak stood there, bent beneath his years. The wizened lips opened, and somehow the breath carried across meters of blustering air: "Terran, perhaps there is a way for us. Dare you come with me to the Ice Folk?"

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Tengri Nor, the Ghost Lake, lay so far north that Altai's rings were only a pale glimmer, half seen by night on the southern horizon. When Flandry and Juchi stepped from their airboat, it was still day. Krasna was an ember, tinging the snowfields red. But it toppled swiftly, purple shadows glided from drift to drift so fast a man could see them.

Flandry had not often met such quietness. Even in space, there was always the low noise of the machinery that kept you alive. Here, the air seemed to freeze all sound; the tiniest wind blew up fine ice crystals, whirling and glistening above diamond-like snowbanks, and it rippled the waters of Tengri Nor, but he could not hear it. He had no immediate sense of cold on his fur-muffled body, even on his thickly greased face—not in this dry atmosphere—but breathing was a sharpness in his nostrils. He thought he could smell the lake, a chemical pungency, but he wasn't sure. None of his Terran senses were quite to be trusted in this winter place.

He said, and the unexpected loudness was like a gunshot, shocking, so that his question ended in a whisper: "Do they know we are here?"

"Oh, yes. They have their ways. They will meet us soon." Juchi looked northward, past the lake shore to the mountainous ruins. Snow had drifted halfway up those marble walls, white on white, with the final sunlight bleeding across shattered colonnades. Frost from the Shaman's breath began to stiffen his beard.

"I suppose they recognize the markings—know this is a friendly craft—but what if the Kha Khan sent a disguised vessel?"

"That was tried once or twice, years ago. The boats were destroyed by some means, far south of here. The Dwellers have their awareness." Juchi raised his arms and started swaying on his feet. A high-pitched chant came from his lips, he threw back his head and closed his eyes.

Flandry had no idea whether the Shaman was indulging superstition, practicing formal ritual, or doing what was actually necessary to summon the glacier folk. He had been in too many strange places to dogmatize. He waited, his eyes ranging the scene.

Beyond the ruins, westward along the northern lake shore, a forest grew. White slender trees with intricate, oddly geometric branches flashed like icicles, like jewels. Their thin bluish leaves vibrated, it seemed they should tinkle, that all this forest was glass, but Flandry had never been near a wilderness so quiet. Low gray plants carpeted the snow between the gleaming boles. Where a rock thrust up here and there, it was almost buried under such lichenoid growth. In some place less cold and hushed, Flandry would have thought of tropical richness.

The lake itself reached out of sight, pale blue between snowbanks. As evening swept across the waters, Flandry could see against shadow that mists hovered above.

Juchi had told him, quite matter-of-factly, that the protoplasmic life native to Altai had adapted to low temperatures in past ages by synthesizing methanol. A fifty-fifty mixture of this and water remained fluid below minus forty degrees. When it finally must freeze, it did not expand into cell-disrupting ice crystals, but became gradually more slushy. Lower life forms remained functional till about seventy below, Celsius; after that they went dormant. The higher animals, being homeothermic, need not suspend animation till the air reached minus a hundred degrees.

Biological accumulation of alcohol kept the polar lakes and rivers fluid till midwinter. The chief problem of all species was to find minerals, in a world largely glaciated. Bacteria brought up some from below; animals traveled far to lick exposed rock, returned to their forests and contributed heavy atoms when they died. But in general, the Altaian ecology made do without. It had never evolved bones for instance, but had elaborated chitinous and cartilaginous materials beyond anything seen on Terra.

The account had sounded plausible and interesting, in a warm kibitka on a grassy slope, with microtexts at hand to give details. When he stood on million-year-old snow, and watching night creep up like smoke through crystal trees and cyclopean ruins, hearing Juchi chant under a huge green sunset sky, Flandry discovered that scientific explanations were but little of the truth.

One of the moons was up. Flandry saw something drift across its copper shield. The objects neared, a flock of white spheres, ranging in diameter from a few centimeters to a giant bigger than the airboat. Tentacles streamed downward from them. Juchi broke off. “Ah,” he said. “Aeromedusae. The Dwellers cannot be far.”

“What?” Flandry hugged himself. The cold was beginning to be felt now, as it gnawed through fur and leather toward flesh.

“Our name for them. They look primitive, but are actually well evolved, with sense organs and brains. They electrolyze hydrogen metabolically to inflate themselves, breathe backward for propulsion, feed on small game which they shock insensible. The Ice Folk have domesticated them.”

Flandry stole a glance at a jagged wall, rearing above gloom to catch a sunbeam and flush rose. “They did more than that, once,” he said with pity

Juchi nodded, oddly little impressed. “I daresay intelligence grew up on Altai in response to worsening conditions—the warming sun.” His tone was detached. “It built a high civilization, but the shortage of metals was a handicap, and the steady shrinking of the snow area may have led to a cultural Collapse. Yet that is not what the Dwellers themselves claim. They have no sense of loss about their past.” He squinted slant eyes in a frown, seeking words. “As nearly as I can understand them, which is not much, they…abandoned something unsuitable…they found better methods.”

Two beings came from the forest.

At first glance they were like dwarfish white-furred men. Then you saw details of squat build and rubbery limbs. The feet were long and webbed, expandable to broad snowshoes or foldable to short skis. The hands had three fingers opposing a thumb set in the middle of the wrist. The ears were feathery tufts; fine tendrils waved above each round black eye; sad gray monkey faces peered from a ruff of hair. Their breath did not steam like the humans': their body temperature was well below the Celsius zero. One of them bore a stone lamp in which an alcohol flame wavered. The other had an intricately carved white staff; in an indefinable way, the circling medusa flock seemed to be guided by it.

They came near, halted, and waited. Nothing moved but the low wind, ruffling their fur and streaming the flame. Juchi stood as quiet. Flandry made himself conform, though his teeth wanted to clap in his jaws. He had seen many kinds of life, on worlds more foreign than this. But there was a strangeness here which got under his skin and crawled.

The sun went down. Thin dustless air gave no twilight. Stars blazed forth, pyrotechnic in a sudden blackness. The edge of the rings painted a remote arc. The moon threw cuprous radiance over the snow, shadows into the forest.

A meteor split the sky with noiseless lightning. Juchi seemed to take that as a signal. He began talking. His voice was like ice, toning as it contracted in midnight cold: not altogether a human voice. Flandry began to understand what a Shaman was, and why he presided over the northland tribes. Few men were able to master the Dwellers' language and deal with them. Yet trade and alliance—metal given for organic fuel and curious plastic substances; mutual defense against the Kha Khan's sky raiders—was a large part of the Tebtengri strength.

One of the beings made answer. Juchi turned to Flandry. "I have said who you are and whence you come. They are not surprised. Before I spoke your need, he said their—, I do not know just what the word means, but it has something to do with communication—he said they could reach Terra itself, as far as mere distance was concerned, but only through…dreams?”

Flandry stiffened. It could be. It could be. How long had men been hunting for some faster-than-light equivalent of radio? A handful of centuries. What was that, compared to the age of the universe? Or even the age of Altai? He realized, not simply intellectually but with his whole organism, how old this planet was. In all that time—

“Telepathy?” he blurted. “I’ve never heard of telepathy with so great a range!”

“No. Not that, or they would have warned us of this Merseian situation before now. It is nothing that I quite understand.” Juchi spoke with care: “He said to me, all the powers they possess look useless in this situation.”

Flandry sighed. “I might have known it. That would have been too easy. No chance for heroics.”

“They have found means to live, less cumbersome than all those buildings and engines were,” said Juchi. “They have been free to think for I know not how many ages. But they have therefore grown weak in sheerly material ways. They help us withstand the aggressions from Ulan Baligh; they can do nothing against the might of Merseia.”

Half seen in red moonlight, one of the autochthones spoke.

Juchi: “They do not fear racial death. They know all things must end, and yet nothing ever really ends. However, it would be desirable that their lesser brethren in the ice forests have a few more million years to live, so that they may also evolve toward truth.”

Which is a fine, resounding ploy, thought Flandry, *provided it be not the simple fact.*

Juchi: “They, like us, are willing to become clients of the Terrestrial Empire. To them, it means nothing; they will never have enough in common with men to be troubled by any human governors. They know Terra will not gratuitously harm them—whereas Merseia would, if only by provoking that planet-wide battle of space fleets you describe. Therefore, the Cold People will assist us in any way they can, though they know of none at present.”

“Do these two speak for their whole race?” asked Flandry dubiously.

“And for the forests and the lakes,” said Juchi.

Flandry thought of a life which was all one great organism, and nodded. “If you say so, I’ll accept it. But if they can’t help—”

Juchi gave an old man’s sigh, like wind over the acrid waters. “I had hoped they could. But now—Have you no plan of your own?”

Flandry stood a long time, feeling the chill creep inward. At last he said: “If the only spaceships are at Ulan Baligh, then it seems we must get into the city somehow, to deliver our message. Have these folk any means of secretly contacting a Betelgeusean?”

Juchi inquired. “No,” he translated the answer. “Not if the traders are closely guarded, and their awareness tells them that is so.”

One of the natives stooped forward a little, above the dull blue fire, so that his face was illuminated. Could as human an emotion as sorrow really be read into those eyes? Words droned. Juchi listened.

“They can get us into the city, undetected, if it be a cold enough night,” he said. “The medusae can carry us through the air, actually seeing radar beams and eluding them. And, of course, a medusa is invisible to metal detectors as well as infrared scopes.” The Shaman paused. “But what use is that, Terra man? We ourselves can walk disguised into Ulan Baligh.

“But could we fly—?” Flandry’s voice trailed off.

“Not without being stopped by traffic control officers and investigated.”

“S-s-so.” Flandry raised his face to the glittering sky. He took the moonlight full in his eyes and was briefly dazzled. Tension tingled along his nerves.

“We’ve debated trying to radio a Betelgeusean ship as it takes off, before it goes into secondary drive.” He spoke aloud, slowly, to get the hammering within himself under control. “But you said the Tebtengri have no set powerful enough to broadcast that far, thousands of kilometers. And, of course, we couldn’t beamcast, since we couldn’t pinpoint the ship at any instant.”

“True. In any event, the Khan’s aerial patrols would detect our transmission and pounce.”

“Suppose a ship, a friendly spaceship, came near this planet without actually landing…could the Ice Dwellers communicate with it?”

Juchi asked; Flandry did not need the translated answer: “No. They have no radio sets at all. Even if they did, their ’casting would be as liable to detection as ours. And did you not say yourself, Orluk, all our messages must be kept secret, right to the moment that the Terran fleet arrives in strength? That Oleg Khan must not even suspect a message has been sent?”

“Well, no harm in asking.” Flandry’s gaze continued to search upward, till he found Betelgeuse like a torch among the constellations. “Could we know there was such a ship in the neighborhood?”

“I daresay it would radio as it approached…notify Ulan Baligh space-port —” Juchi conferred with the nonhumans. “Yes. We could have men, borne by medusae, stationed unnoticeably far above the city. They could carry receivers. There would be enough beam leakage for them to listen to any conversation between the spaceship and the portmaster. Would that serve?"

Flandry breathed out in a great freezing gust. "It might."

Suddenly, and joyously, he laughed. Perhaps no such sound had ever rung across Tengri Nor. The Dwellers started back, like frightened small animals. Juchi stood in shadow. For that instant, only Captain Dominic Flandry of Imperial Terra had light upon him. He stood with his head raised into the copper moonlight, and laughed like a boy.

"By Heaven," he shouted, "we're going to do it!"

-10-

An autumn gale came down off the pole. It gathered snow on its way across the steppe, and struck Ulan Baligh near midnight. In minutes, the steep red roofs were lost to sight. Close by a lighted window, a man saw horizontal white streaks, whirling out of darkness and back into darkness. If he went a few meters away, pushing through drifts already knee-high, the light was gone. He stood blind, buffeted by the storm, and heard it rave.

Flandry descended from the upper atmosphere. Its cold had smitten so deep he thought he might never be warm again. In spite of an oxygen tank, his lungs were starving. He saw the blizzard from above as a moon-dappled black blot, the early ice floes on Ozero Rurik dashed to and fro along its southern fringe. A cabling of tentacles meshed him, he sat under a giant balloon rushing downward through the sky. Behind him trailed a flock of other medusae, twisting along air currents he could not feel to avoid radar beams he could not see. Ahead of him was only one, bearing a Dweller huddled against a cake of ice; for what lay below was hell's own sulfurous wind to the native.

Even Flandry felt how much warmer it was, when the snowstorm enclosed him. He crouched forward, squinting into a nothingness that yelled. Once his numbed feet, dangling down, struck a rooftree. The blow came as if from far away. Palely at first, strengthening as he neared, the Prophet's Tower thrust its luminous shaft up and out of sight.

Flandry groped for the nozzle at his shoulder. His destination gave just enough light for him to see through the driven flakes. Another medusa crowded close, bearing a pressure tank of paint. Somehow, Flandry reached across the air between and made the hose fast.

Now, Arctic intelligence, do you understand what I want to do? Can you guide this horse of mine for me?

The wind yammered in his ears. He heard other noises like blasting, the powerful breaths by which his medusa moved itself. Almost, he was battered against the tablet wall. His carrier wobbled in midair, fighting to maintain position. An inlaid letter, big as a house, loomed before him, black against shining white. He aimed his hose and squirted.

Damn! The green jet was flung aside in a flaw of wind. He corrected his aim and saw the paint strike. It remained liquid even at this temperature… no matter, it was sticky enough…The first tank was quickly used up. Flandry coupled to another. Blue this time. All the Tebtengri had contributed all the squirtable paint they had, every hue in God's rainbow. Flandry could but hope there would be enough.

There was, though he came near fainting from chill and exhaustion before the end of the job. He could not remember ever having so brutal a task. Even so, when the last huge stroke was done, he could not resist adding an exclamation point at the very bottom—three centimeters high.

“Let’s go,” he whispered. Somehow, the mute Dweller understood and pointed his staff. The medusa flock sprang through the clouds.

Flandry had a moment’s glimpse of a military airboat. It had detached itself from the flock hovering above the spaceport, perhaps going off duty. As the medusae broke from the storm into clear moonlight and ringlight, the craft veered. Flandry saw its guns stab energy bolts into the flock, and reached for his own futile blaster. His fingers were wooden, they didn’t close…

The medusae, all but his and the Dweller’s whipped about. They surrounded the patrol boat, laid tentacles fast and clung. It was nearly buried under them. Electric fires crawled, sparks dripped, these creatures could break hydrogen from water. Flandry recalled in a dull part of his mind that a metallic fuselage was a Faraday cage, immune to lightning. But when concentrated electric discharges burned holes, spotwelded control circuits—the boat staggered in midair. The medusae detached themselves. The boat plummeted.

Flandry relaxed and let his creature bear him northward.

-11-

The town seethed. There had been rioting in the Street of Gunsmiths, and blood still dappled the new-fallen snow. Armed men tramped around palace and spaceport; mobs hooted beyond them. From the lake shore encampments came war music, pipes squealed, gongs crashed, the young men rode their varyaks in breakneck circles and cursed.

Oleg Khan looked out the palace window. “It shall be made good to you,” he muttered. “Oh, yes, my people, you shall have satisfaction.”

Turning to the Betelgeusean, who had just been fetched, he glared into the blue face. “You have seen?”

“Yes, your majesty.” Zalat’s Altaian, usually fluent and little accented, grew thick. He was a badly shaken being. Only the quick arrival of the royal guards had saved his ship from destruction by a thousand shrieking fanatics. “I swear, I, my crew, we had nothing to do with…we are innocent as—”

“Of course! Of course!” Oleg Yesukai brought one palm down in an angry slicing motion. “I am not one of those ignorant rodent herders. Every Betelgeusean has been under supervision, every moment since—” He checked himself.

“I have still not understood why,” faltered Zalat.

“Was my reason not made clear to you? You know the Terran visitor was killed by Tebtengri operatives, the very day he arrived. It bears out what I have long suspected, those tribes have become religiously xenophobic. Since they doubtless have other agents in the city, who will try to murder your people in turn, it is best all of you be closely guarded, have contact only with men we know are loyal, until I have full control of the situation.”

His own words calmed Oleg somewhat. He sat down, stroked his beard and watched Zalat from narrowed eyes. “Your difficulties this morning are regrettable,” he continued smoothly. “Because you are outworlders, and the defiling symbols are not in the Altaian alphabet, many people leaped to the conclusion that it was some dirty word in your language. I, of course, know better. I also know from the exact manner in which a patrol craft was lost last night, how this outrage was done: unquestionably by Tebtengri, with the help of the Arctic devil-folk. Such a vile deed would not trouble them in the least; they are not followers of the Prophet. But what puzzles me—I admit this frankly, though confidentially—*why?* A daring, gruelling task…merely for a wanton insult?"

He glanced back toward the window. From this angle, the crimson Tower looked itself. You had to be on the north to see what had been done: the tablet wall disfigured by more than a kilometer of splashed paint. But from that side, the fantastic desecration was visible across entire horizons.

The Kha Khan doubled a fist. "It shall be repaid them," he said. "This has rallied the orthodox tribes behind me as no other thing imaginable. When their children are boiled before their eyes, the Tebtengri will realize what they have done."

Zalat hesitated. "Your majesty—"

"Yes?" Oleg snarled, as he must at something.

"Those symbols are letters of the Terran alphabet."

"What?"

"I know the Anglic language somewhat," said Zalat. "Many Betelgeuseans do. But how could those Tebtengri ever have learned—"

Oleg, who knew the answer to that, interrupted by seizing the captain's tunic and shaking him. "What does it say?" he cried.

"That's the strangest part, your majesty," stammered Zalat. "It doesn't mean anything. Not that makes sense."

"Well, what sound does it spell, then? Speak before I have your teeth pulled!"

"Mayday," choked Zalat. "Just Mayday, your majesty."

Oleg let him go. For a while there was silence. At last the Khan said: "Is that a Terran word?"

"Well…it could be. I mean, well, May is the name of a month in the Terran calendar, and Day means 'diurnal period.'" Zalat rubbed his yellow eyes, searching for logic. "I suppose Mayday could mean the first day of May."

Oleg nodded slowly. "That sounds reasonable. The Altaian calendar, which is modified from the ancient Terran, has a similar name for a month of what is locally springtime. Mayday—spring festival day? Perhaps."

He returned to the window and brooded across the city. "It's long until May," he said. "If that was an incitement to…anything…it's foredoomed. We are going to break the Tebtengri this very winter. By next spring—" He cleared his throat and finished curtly: "Certain other projects will be well under way."

"How could it be an incitement, anyhow, your majesty?" argued Zalat, emboldened. "Who in Ulan Baligh could read it?"

"True. I can only conjecture, some wild act of defiance—or superstition, magical ritual—" The Khan turned on his heel. "You are leaving shortly, are you not?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"You shall convey a message. No other traders are to come here for a standard year. We will have troubles enough, suppressing the Tebtengri and their aboriginal allies." Oleg shrugged. "In any event, it would be useless for merchants to visit us. War will disrupt the caravans. Afterward—perhaps."

Winter came early to the northlands. Flandry, following the Mangu Tuman in their migratory cycle, saw snow endless across the plains, under a sky like blued steel. The tribe, wagons and herds and people, were a hatful of dust strewn on immensity: here a moving black dot, there a thin smoke-streaked vertical in windless air. Krasna hung low in the southeast, a frosty red-gold wheel.

Three folk glided from the main ordu. They were on skis, rifles slung behind their parkas, hands holding tethers which led to a small negagrav tow unit. It flew quickly, so skis sang on the thin scrip snow.

Arghun Tiliksky said hard-voiced: “I can appreciate that you and Juchi keep secret the reason for that Tower escapade of yours, five weeks ago. What none of us know, none can reveal if captured. Yet you seem quite blithe about the consequences. Our scouts tell us that infuriated warriors flock to Oleg Khan, that he has pledged to annihilate us this very year. In consequence, all the Tebtengri must remain close together, not spread along the whole Arctic Circle as before—and hereabouts, there is not enough forage under the snow for that many herds. I say to you, the Khan need only wait, and by the end of the season famine will have done half his work for him!”

“Let’s hope he plans on that,” said Flandry. “Less strenuous than fighting, isn’t it?”

Arghun’s angry young face turned toward him. The noyon clipped: “I do not share this awe of all things Terran. You are as human as I. In this environment, where you are untrained, you are much more fallible. I warn you plainly, unless you give me good reason to do otherwise, I shall request a kurultai. And at it I will argue that we strike now at Ulan Baligh, try for a decision while we can still count on full bellies.”

Bourtai cried aloud, “No! That would be asking for ruin. They outnumber us down there, three or four to one. And I have seen some of the new engines the Merseians brought. It would be butchery!”

“It would be quick.” Arghun glared at Flandry. “Well?”

The Terran sighed. He might have expected it. Bourtai was always near him, and Arghun was always near Bourtai, and the officer had spoken surly words before now. He might have known that this invitation to hunt a flock of *sataru*—mutant ostriches escaped from the herds and gone wild—masked something else. At least it was decent of Arghun to warn him.

“If you don’t trust me,” he said, “though Lord knows I’ve fought and bled and frostbitten my nose in your cause—can’t you trust Juchi Ilyak? He and the Dwellers know my little scheme; they’ll assure you it depends on our hanging back and avoiding battle.”

“Juchi grows old,” said Arghun. “His mind is feeble as—Hoy, there!”

He yanked a guide line. The nega-grav unit purred to a stop and hung in air, halfway up a long slope. His politics dropped from Arghun, he pointed at the snow with a hunting dog’s eagerness. “Spoor,” he hissed. “We go by muscle power now, to sneak close. The birds can outrun this motor if they hear it. Do you go straight up this hill, Orluk Flandry; Bourtai and I will come around on opposite sides of it—”

The Altaians had slipped their reins and skied noiselessly from him before Flandry quite understood what had happened. Looking down, the Terran saw big splay tracks: a pair of sataru. He started after them. How the deuce did you manage these foot-sticks, anyway? Waddling across the slope, he tripped himself and went down. His nose clipped a boulder. He sat up, swearing in eighteen languages and Old Martian phonoglyphs.

“This they call fun?” He tottered erect. Snow had gotten under his parka hood. It began to melt, trickling over his ribs in search of a really good place to refreeze. “Great greasy comets,” said Flandry, “I might have been sitting in the Everest House with a bucket of champagne, lying to some beautiful wench about my exploits…but no, I had to come out here and do ’em!”

Slowly, he dragged himself up the hill, crouched on its brow, and peered through an unnecessarily cold and thorny bush. No two-legged birds, only a steep slant back down to the plain…wait!

He saw blood and the dismembered avian shapes an instant before the beasts attacked him.

They seemed to rise from weeds and snowdrifts, as if the earth had spewed them. Noiselessly they rushed in, a dozen white scuttering forms big as police dogs. Flandry glimpsed long sharp noses, alert black eyes that hated him, high backs and hairless tails. He yanked his rifle loose and fired. The slug bowled the nearest animal over. It rolled halfway downhill, lay a while, and crawled back to fight some more.

Flandry didn’t see it. The next was upon him. He shot it point blank. One of its fellows crouched to tear the flesh. But the rest ran on. Flandry took aim at a third. A heavy body landed between his shoulders. He went down, and felt jaws rip his leather coat.

He rolled over, somehow, shielding his face with one arm. His rifle had been torn from him: a beast fumbled it in forepaws almost like hands. He groped for the dagger at his belt. Two of the animals were on him, slashing with chisel teeth. He managed to kick one in the nose. It squealed, bounced away, sprang back with a couple of new arrivals to help.

Someone yelled. It sounded very far off, drowned by Flandry's own heartbeat. The Terran drove his knife into a hairy shoulder. The beast writhed free, leaving him weaponless. Now they were piling on him where he lay. He fought with boots and knees, fists and elbows, in a cloud of kicked-up snow. An animal jumped in the air, came down on his midriff. The wind whooffed out of him. His face-defending arm dropped, and the creature went for his throat.

Arghun came up behind. The Altaian seized the animal by the neck. His free hand flashed steel, he disemboweled it and flung it toward the pack in one expert movement. Several of them fell on the still snarling shape and fed. Arghun booted another exactly behind the ear. It dropped as if poleaxed. One jumped from the rear, to get on his back. He stooped, his right hand made a judo heave, and as the beast soared over his head he ripped its stomach with his knife.

"Up, man!" He hoisted Flandry. The Terran stumbled beside him, while the pack chattered around. Now its outliers began to fall dead: Bourtai had regained the hillcrest and was sniping. The largest of the animals whistled. At that signal, the survivors bounded off. They were lost to view in seconds.

When they had reached Bourtai, Arghun sank down gasping. The girl flew to Flandry. "Are you hurt?" she sobbed.

"Only in my pride—I guess—" He looked past her to the noyon. "Thanks," he said inadequately.

"You are a guest," grunted Arghun. After a moment: "They grow bolder each year. I had never expected to be attacked this near an ordu. Something must be done about them, if we live through the winter."

"What are they?" Flandry shuddered toward relaxation.

"Gurchaku. They range in packs over all the steppes, up into the Khrebet They will eat anything but prefer meat. Chiefly sataru and other feral animals, but they raid our herds, have killed people—" Arghun looked grim. "They were not as large in my grandfather's day, nor as cunning."

Flandry nodded. "Rats. Which is not an exclamation."

"I know what rats are," said Bourtai. "But the gurchaku—"

"A new genus. Similar things have happened on other colonized planets." Flandry wished for a cigarette. He wished so hard that Bourtai had to remind him before he continued: "Oh, yes. Some of the stowaway rats on your ancestors' ships must have gone into the wilds, as these began to be Terrestrialized. Size was advantageous: helped them keep warm, enabled them to prey on the big animals you were developing. Selection pressure, short generations, genetic drift within a small original population…Nature is quite capable of forced-draft evolution on her own hook."

He managed a tired grin at Bourtai. "After all," he said, "if a frontier planet has beautiful girls, tradition requires that it have monsters as well."

Her blush was like fire.

They returned to camp in silence. Flandry entered the yurt given him, washed and changed clothes, lay down on his bunk and stared at the ceiling. He reflected bitterly on all the Terran romancing he had ever heard, the High Frontier in general and the dashing adventures of the Intelligence Corps in particular. So what did it amount to? A few nasty moments with men or giant rats that wanted to kill you; stinking leather clothes, wet feet, chilblains and frostbite, unseasoned food, creaking wheels exchanged for squealing runners; temperance, chastity, early rising, weighty speech with tribal elders, not a book he could enjoy or a joke he could understand for lightyears. He yawned, rolled over on his stomach, tried to sleep, gave up after a while, and began to wish Arghun's reckless counsel would be accepted. Anything to break this dreariness!

It tapped on the door. He started to his feet, bumped his head on a curved ridgepole, swore, and said: "Come in." The caution of years laid his hand on a blaster.

The short day was near an end, only a red streak above one edge of the world. His lamp picked out Bourtai. She entered, closed the door, and stood unspeaking.

"Why…hullo." Flandry paused. "What brings you here?"

"I came to see if you were indeed well." Her eyes did not meet his.

"Oh? Oh, yes. Yes, of course," he said stupidly. "Kind of you. I mean, uh, shall I make some tea?"

"If you were bitten, it should be tended," said the girl. "Gurchaku bites can be infectious."

"No, thanks, I escaped any actual wounds." Automatically, Flandry added with a smile: "I could wish otherwise, though. So fair a nurse—"

Again he saw the blood rise in her face. Suddenly he understood. He would have realized earlier, had these people not been more reticent than his own. A heavy pulse beat in his throat. "Sit down," he invited.

She lowered herself to the floor. He joined her, sliding a practiced arm over her shoulder. She did not flinch. He let his hand glide lower, till the arm was around her waist. She leaned against him.

"Do you think we will see another springtime?" she asked. Her tone grew steady once more; it was a quite practical question.

"I have one right here with me," he said. His lips brushed her dark hair.

"No one speaks thus in the ordu," she breathed. Quickly: "We are both cut off from our kindred, you by distance and I by death. Let us not remain lonely."

He forced himself to give fair warning: "I shall return to Terra the first chance I get."

"I know," she cried, "but until then—"

His lips found hers.

There was a thump on the door.

"Go away!" Flandry and Bourtai said it together, looked surprised into each other's eyes, and laughed with pleasure. "My lord," called a man's voice, "Toghrul Gur-Khan sends me. A message has been picked up—a Terran spaceship!"

Flandry knocked Bourtai over in his haste to get outside. But even as he ran, he thought with frustration that this job had been hoodooed from the outset.

-13-

Among the thin winds over Ulan Baligh, hidden by sheer height, a warrior sat in the patient arms of a medusa. He breathed oxygen from a tank and rested numbed fingers on a small radio transceiver. After four hours he was relieved; perhaps no other breed of human could have endured so long a watch.

Finally he was rewarded. His earphones crackled with a faint, distorted voice, speaking no language he had ever heard. A return beam gabbled from the spaceport. The man up above gave place to another, who spoke a halting, accented Altaian, doubtless learned from the Betelgeuseans.

The scout of the Tebtengri dared not try any communication of his own. If detected (and the chances were that it would be) such a call would bring a nuclear missile streaking upward from Ulan Baligh. However, his transceiver could amplify and relay what came to it. Medusae elsewhere carried similar sets: a long chain, ending in the ordu of Toghrul Vavilov. Were that re-transmission intercepted by the enemy, no one would be alarmed. They would take it for some freak of reflection off the ionosphere.

The scout's binoculars actually showed him the Terran spaceship as it descended. He whistled in awe at its sleek, armed swiftness. Still, he thought, it was only one vessel, paying a visit to Oleg the Damned, who had carefully disguised all his modern installations. Oleg would be like butter to his guests, they would see what he wished them to see and no more. Presently they would go home again, to report that Altai was a harmless half-barbaric outpost, safely forgettable.

The scout sighed, beat gloved hands together, and wished his relief would soon arrive.

And up near the Arctic Circle, Dominic Flandry turned from Toghrul's receiver. A frosted window framed his head with the early northern night. "That's it," he said. "We'll maintain our radio monitors, but I don't expect to pick up anything else interesting, except the moment when the ship takes off again."

"When will that be?" asked the Gur-Khan.

"In a couple of days, I imagine," said Flandry. "We've got to be ready! All the tribesmen must be alerted, must move out on the plains according to the scheme Juchi and I drew up for you."

Toghrul nodded. Arghun Tiliksky, who had also crowded into the kibitka, demanded: "What scheme is this? Why have I not been told?"

"You didn't need to know," Flandry answered. Blandly: "The warriors of Tebtengri can be moving at top speed, ready for battle, on five minutes' notice, under any conditions whatsoever. Or so you were assuring me in a ten-minute speech one evening last week. Very well, move them, noyon."

Arghun bristled. "And then—"

"You will lead the Mangu Tuman varyak division straight south for 500 kilometers," said Toghrul. "There you will await radio orders. The other tribal forces will be stationed elsewhere; you will doubtless see a few, but strict radio silence is to be maintained between you. The less mobile vehicles will have to stay in this general region, with the women and children maneuvering them."

"And the herds," reminded Flandry. "Don't forget, we can cover quite a large area with all the Tebtengri herds."

"But this is lunacy!" yelped Arghun. "If Oleg knows we're spread out in such a manner, and drives a wedge through—"

"He won't know," said Flandry. "Or if he does, he won't know why: which is what counts. Now, git!"

For a moment Arghun's eyes clashed with his. Then the noyon slapped gauntlets against one thigh, whirled, and departed. It was indeed only a few moments before the night grew loud with varyak motors and lowing battle horns.

When that had faded, Toghrul tugged his beard, looked across the radio, and said to Flandry: "Now can you tell me just what fetched that Terran spaceship here?"

“Why, to inquire more closely about the reported death of me, a Terran citizen, on Altai,” grinned Flandry. “At least, if he is not a moron, that is what the captain will tell Oleg. And he will let Oleg convince him it was all a deplorable accident, and he’ll take off again.”

Toghrul stared, then broke into buffalo laughter. Flandry chimed in. For a while the Gur-Khan of the Mangu Tuman and the field agent of the Imperial Terrestrial Naval Intelligence Corps danced around the kibitka singing about the flowers that bloom in the spring.

Presently Flandry left. There wasn’t going to be much sleep for anyone in the next few days. Tonight, though—He rapped eagerly on his own yurt. Silence answered him, the wind and a distant sad mewing of the herds. He scowled and opened the door.

A note lay on his bunk. *My beloved, the alarm signals have blown. Toghrul gave me weapons and a new varyak. My father taught me to ride and shoot as well as any man. It is only fitting that the last of Clan Tumuri go with the warriors.*

Flandry stared at the scrawl for a long while. Finally, “Oh, hell and tiddlywinks,” he said, and dressed and went to bed.

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When he woke in the morning, his cart was under way. He emerged to find the whole encampment grinding across the steppe. Toghrul stood to one side, taking a navigational sight on the rings. He greeted Flandry with a gruff: “We should be in our own assigned position tomorrow.” A messenger dashed up, something needed the chief ’s attention, one of the endless emergencies of so big a group on the move. Flandry found himself alone.

By now he had learned not to offer his own unskilled assistance. He spent the day composing scurrilous limericks about the superiors who had assigned him to this mission. The trek continued noisily through the dark. Next morning there was drifted snow to clear before camp could be made. Flandry discovered that he was at least able to wield a snow shovel. Soon he wished he weren't.

By noon the ordu was settled; not in the compact standardized laagers which offered maximum safety, but straggling over kilometers in a line which brought mutinous grumbling. Toghrul roared down all protest and went back to his kibitka to crouch over the radio. After some hours he summoned Flandry.

"Ship departing," he said. "We've just picked up a routine broadcast warning aircraft from the spaceport area." He frowned. "Can we carry out all our maneuvers while we're still in daylight?"

"It doesn't matter," said Flandry. "Our initial pattern is already set up. Once he spots that from space-and he's pretty sure to, because it's routine to look as long and hard as possible at any doubtful planet—the skipper will hang around out there."

His gray eyes went to a map on the desk before him. The positions of all Tebtengri units had now been radio confirmed. As marked by Toghrul, the ordus lay in a heavy east-and-west line, 500 kilometers long across the winter-white steppe. The more mobile varyak divisions sprawled their bunches to form lines slanting past either end of the stationary one, meeting in the north. He stroked his mustache and waited.

"Spaceship cleared for take off. Stand by. Rise, spaceship!"

As the relayed voice trickled weakly from the receiver, Flandry snatched up a pencil and drew another figure under Toghrul's gaze. "This is the next formation," he said. "Might as well start it now, I think; the ship will have seen the present one in a few minutes."

The Gur-Khan bent over the microphone and rapped: "Varyak divisions of Clans Munlik, Fyodor, Kubilai, Tuli, attention! Drive straight west for 100 kilometers. Belgutai, Bagdarin, Chagatai, Kassar, due east for 100 kilometers. Gleb, Jahangir—"

Flandry rolled his pencil in tightened fingers. As the reports came in, over an endless hour, he marked where each unit had halted. The whole device began to look pathetically crude.

"I have been thinking," said Toghrul after a period of prolonged silence.

"Nasty habit," said Flandry. "Hard to break. Try cold baths and long walks."

"What if Oleg finds out about this?"

"He's pretty sure to discover something is going on. His air scouts will pick up bits of our messages. But only bits, since these are short-range transmissions. I'm depending on our own air cover to keep the enemy from getting too good a look at what we're up to. All Oleg will know is, we're maneuvering around on a large scale." Flandry shrugged. "It would seem most logical to me, if I were him, that the Tebtengri were practicing formations against the day he attacks."

"Which is not far off." Toghrul drummed the desk top.

Flandry drew a figure on his paper. "This one next," he said.

"Yes." Toghrul gave the orders. Afterward: "We can continue through dark, you know. Light bonfires. Send airboats loaded with fuel to the varyak men, so they can do the same."

"That would be well."

“Of course,” frowned the chief, “it will consume an unholy amount of fuel. More than we can spare.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Flandry. “Before the shortage gets acute, your people will be safe, their needs supplied from outside—or they’ll be dead, which is still more economical.”

The night wore on. Now and then Flandry dozed. He paid scant heed to the sunrise; he had only half completed his job. Sometime later a warrior was shown in. “From Juchi Shaman,” he reported, with a clumsy salute.” Airscouts watching the Ozero Rurik area report massing of troops, outrider columns moving northward.”

Toghrul smote the desk with one big fist. “Already?” he said.

“It’ll take them a few days to get their big push this far,” said Flandry, though his guts felt cold at the news. “Longer, if we harry them from the air. All I need is one more day, I think.”

“But when can we expect help?” said Toghrul.

“Not for another three or four weeks at the very least,” said Flandry. “Word has to reach Catawrayannis Base, its commandant has to patch together a task force which has to get here. Allow a month, plus or minus. Can we retreat that long, holding the enemy off without undue losses to ourselves?”

“We had better,” said Toghrul, “or we are done.”

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Captain Flandry laid the rifle stock to his shoulder. Its plastic felt smooth and uncold, as nearly as his numbed cheek could feel anything. The chill of the metal parts, which would skin any fingers that touched them, bit through his gloves.

Hard to gauge distances in this red half-light, across this whining scud of snow. Hard to guess windage; even trajectories were baffling, on this miserable three-quarter-gee planet...He decided the opposition wasn't close enough yet, and lowered his gun.

Beside him, crouched in the same lee of a snowbank, the Dweller turned dark eyes upon the man. "I go now?" he asked. His Altaian was even worse than Flandry's, though Juchi himself had been surprised to learn that any of the Ice Folk knew the human tongue.

"I told you no." Flandry's own accent was thickened by the frostbitten puffiness of his lips. "You must cross a hundred meters of open ground to reach those trees. Running, you would be seen and shot before going half way. Unless we can arrange a distraction—"

He peered again through the murk. Krasna had almost vanished from these polar lands for the winter, but was still not far below the horizon. There were still hours when a surly gleam in the south gave men enough light to see a little distance.

The attacking platoon was so close now that Flandry could make out blurred individuals, outlined against the great vague lake. He could see that they rode a sort of modified varyak, with runners and low-powered negagrav thrust to drive them across the permasnow. It was sheer ill luck that he and his squad had blundered into them. But the past month, or however long, had been that sort of time. Juchi had withdrawn all his people into the depths of the Ice Lands, to live off a few kine slaughtered and frozen while their herds wandered the steppes under slight guard... while a front line of Tebtengri and Dwellers fought a guerrilla war to slow

Oleg Khan’s advance…Skulk, shoot, run, hide, bolt your food, snatch a nap in a sleeping bag as dank as yourself, and go forth to skulk again…

Now the rest of Flandry’s party lay dead by Tengri Nor. And he himself, with this one companion, was trapped by a pursuit moving faster on machine than he could afoot.

He gauged his range afresh. Perhaps. He got his sights on a man in the lead and jerked his head at the Dweller, who slipped from him. Then he fired.

The southerner jerked in the saddle, caught at his belly, and slid slowly to the ground. Even in this glum light, his blood was a red shout on the snow. Through the wind, Flandry heard the others yell. They swept into motion, dispersing. He followed them with his sights, aimed at another, squeezed trigger again. A miss. This wasn’t enough. He had to furnish a few seconds’ diversion, so the Dweller could reach those crystalline trees at his back.

Flandry thumbed his rifle to automatic fire. He popped up, shooting, and called: “My grandmother can lick your grandmother!”

Diving, he sensed more than heard the lead storm that went where he had been. Energy bolts crashed through the air overhead, came down again and sizzled in the snow. He breathed hot steam. Surely that damned Dweller had gotten to the woods now! He fired blind at the inward-rushing enemy. *Come on, someone, pull me out of this mess!—What use is it, anyhow? The little guy babbled about calling through the roots, letting all the forest know*—Through gun-thunder, Flandry heard the first high ringing noise. He raised his eyes in time to see the medusae attack.

They swarmed from above, hundreds upon hundreds, their tentacles full of minor lightning. Some were hit, burst into hydrogen flame, and sought men to burn even as they died. Others snatched warriors from the saddle, lifted them, and dropped them in the mortally cold waters of Tengri Nor. Most went efficiently about a task of electrocution. Flandry had not quite understood what happened before he saw the retreat begin. By the time he had climbed erect, it was a rout.

"Holy hopping hexaflexagons," he mumbled in awe. "Now why can't I do that stunt?"

The Dweller returned, small, furry, rubbery, an unimpressive goblin who said with shyness: "Not enough medusa for do this often. Your friends come. We wait."

"Huh? Oh…you mean a rescue party. Yeh, I suppose some of our units would have seen that flock arrive here and will come to investigate." Flandry stamped his feet, trying to force circulation back. "Nice haul," he said, looking over strewn weapons and vehicles. "I think we got revenge for our squad."

"Dead man just as dead on any side of fight," reproached the Dweller.

Flandry grimaced. "Don't remind me."

He heard the whirr of tow motors. The ski patrol which came around the woods was bigger than he had expected. He recognized Arghun and Bourtai at its head. It came to him, with a shock, that he hadn't spoken to either one, except to say hello-goodbye, since the campaign began. Too busy. That was the trouble with war. Leave out the toil, discipline, discomfort, scant sleep, lousy food, monotony, and combat, and war would be a fine institution.

He strolled to meet the newcomers, as debonairly as possible for a man without cigarettes. "Hi," he said.

"Dominic…it was you—" Bourtai seized his hands. "You might have been killed!" she gasped.

"Occupational hazard," said Flandry. "I thought you were in charge of our western division, Arghun."

"No more fighting there," said the noyon. "I am going about gathering our troops."

"What?"

"Have you not heard?" The frank eyes widened. Arghun stood for a moment in the snow, gaping. Then a grin cracked his frozen mustache; he slapped Flandry's back and shouted: "The Terrans have arrived!"

"Huh?" Flandry felt stunned. The blow he had taken—Arghun owned a hefty set of muscles—wait, *what* had he said?

"Yesterday," chattered the Altaian. "I suppose your portable radio didn't pick up the news, nor anyone in that company you were fighting. Reception is poor in this area. Or maybe they were fanatics. There are some, whom we'll have to dispose of. But that should not be difficult."

He brought himself under control and went on more calmly: "A task force appeared and demanded the surrender of all Yesukai forces as being Merseian clients. The commander at Ulan Baligh yielded without a fight—what could he have done? Oleg Khan tried to rally his men at the front…oh, you should have been listening, the ether was lively last night!…but a couple of Terran spaceships flew up and dropped a demonstration bomb squarely on his headquarters. That was the end of that. The tribesmen of the Khanate are already disengaging and streaming south. Juchi Shaman has a call from the Terran admiral at Ulan Baligh, to come advise him what to do next—oh yes, and bring you along—"

Flandry closed his eyes. He swayed on his feet, so that Bourtai caught him in her arms and cried, “What is it, my dear one?”

“Brandy,” he whispered. “Tobacco. India tea. Shrimp mayonnaise, with a bottle of gray Riesling on the side. Air conditioning…” He shook himself. “Sorry. My mind wandered.”

He scarcely saw how her lip trembled. Arghun did, gave the Terran a defiant look, and caught the girl’s hand in his own. She clung to that like a lost child.

This time Flandry did notice. His mouth twitched upward. “Bless you, my children,” he murmured.

“What?” Arghun snapped it in an anger half bewilderment.

“When you get as old and battered as I,” said Flandry, “you will realize that no one dies of a broken heart. In fact, it heals with disgusting speed. If you want to name your first-born Dominic, I will be happy to mail a silver spoon, suitably engraved.”

“But—” stammered Bourtai. “But—” She gave up and held Arghun’s hand more tightly.

The noyon’s face burned with blood. He said hastily, seeking impersonal things: “Now will you explain your actions, Terra man?”

“Hm?” Flandry blinked. “Oh. Oh, yes. To be sure.”

He started walking. The other two kept pace, along the thin blue Lake of Ghosts, under a lacework of icy leaves. The red halfday smoldered toward night. Flandry spoke, with laughter reborn in his voice:

“Our problem was to send a secret message. The most secret possible would, of course, be one which nobody recognized as a message. For instance, Mayday painted on the Prophet’s Tower. It looked like gibberish, pure spiteful mischief…but all the city could see it. They'd talk. How they'd talk! Even if no Betelgeuseans happened to be at Ulan Baligh just then, there would soon be some who would certainly hear news so sensational, no matter how closely they were guarded. And the Betelgeuseans in turn would carry the yarn home with them—where the Terrans connected with the Embassy would hear it. And the Terrans would understand!

"You see, Mayday is a very ancient code call on my planet. It means, simply, *Help me.*"

"Oh!" exclaimed Bourtai.

"Oh-ho," said Arghun. He slapped his thigh and his own laughter barked forth, "Yes, I see it now! Thanks, friend, for a joke to tell my grandchildren!"

"A classic," agreed Flandry with his normal modesty. "My corps was bound to send a ship to investigate. Knowing little or nothing, its men would be alert and wary. Oleg's tale of my accidental death, or whatever he told them, would be obvious seafood in view of that first message; but I figured I could trust them to keep their mouths shut, pretend to be taken in by him, until they could learn more. The problem now was, how to inform them exactly what the situation was—without Oleg knowing.

"Of course, you can guess how that was done: by maneuvering the whole Tebtengri Shamanate across the plain, to form Terran letters visible through a telescope. It could only be a short, simple note; but it served."

He filled his lungs with the keen air. Through all his weariness, the magnificence of being alive flowed up into him. He grinned and added, half to himself: "Those were probably the first secret messages ever sent in an alphabet ranging from one to five hundred kilometers tall."

IN THE SHADOW

There was a man called Danilo Rouvaratz who signed the Petition of Rights. When it was denied and rioting became insurrection, he led the rebels in his own sector. A firegun killed him as the monitors entered Zagreb.

At that time the Gearch was Huang III, wily enough to understand the uses of mercy. He pardoned most of the insurgents, made certain reforms, and thus put out the fire. Still, he knew that embers remained under the ashes. Best would be to scatter them. Investigators learned that Danilo Rouvaratz had left several children. Government care was provided. Ten-year-old Karl went to a boarding school in North America, and thence to the Space Academy. He proved to be an excellent pilot, and his role in the hazardous rescue of the Mars liner *Flying World* made him quite a public hero. But he had always been a prickly, too independent sort, and his dossier suggested that some degree of resentment lingered in him. A very natural solution to the potential problem was to offer him a berth on the Acheron expedition. He ought to feel duly grateful for that; and he would most certainly be out of the way for a while.

Thus it was that he found himself nearing a star he could not see.

He did not know until too late. His boat was in orbit, under low reverse thrust, so that she spiraled in toward what he supposed was the burned-out dwarf he had come to find. He sat tense in his harness at the pilot board, eyes nickering from sky to radarscope to gauges which registered the emissions of test probes fired ahead. As soon as he got reflections from an astronomical body—and his instruments could pick out a meter-wide rock at a thousand kilometers—he would stop the jets and swing free. But the screens showed only random flickers, ghost images of atoms and electrons lost in vacuum.

Aaron Wheeler entered the control turret, balanced his slight deceleration-pressure weight against a handhold, and asked if there was any sign yet.

“No,” said Karl Rouvaratz. “Get aft where you belong.”

Wheeler bridled. The movement was actually noticeable in his spacesuit. He was a lean, sharp-faced, gray-haired man of good family and considerable attainments. Throughout his life, people had deferred to him. “May I remind you,” he snapped, “that this trip is on my account? You are simply ferrying me to the object I am to study.”

Rouvaratz turned his blocky frame half around. His eyes flared green in the dark, rough countenance. “While we’re out here alone,” he said, “I’ve got ship captain’s authority. Go back. I’ll let you know when we spot something. What do you think intercoms are for?”

Wheeler poised stiff and stubborn. Briefly, Rouvaratz wanted to force him. That would be easy and satisfying. The gods who gave the pilot two men’s physical strength had put him in a milieu where he had no use for it. This was the basic source of his anger at the world.

But no. He must not leave his post while they were under power. And he must be diplomatic. The expedition comprised twenty human beings, almost a dozen astronomical units from home, receding fifty kilometers further with every second that passed. Mystery encompassed them, and if trouble came there could be no succor. If they did not work together, they were dead.

Darkness and knife-bright stars crowned Wheeler in the viewdome. Sol was cruelly radiant, but shrunken and strange. Acheron could not be found, not by any means save the fact of its monstrous pull. The boat fumbled through night.

Rouvaratz sighed. It was as if some of the weariness of the journey still possessed him, six months from Lunar orbit to the point where the *Shikari* intercepted her target. And then had followed tedious maneuverings; the firing of one radio rocket after another; the computation of where Acheron must be by the curvatures that were forced on their trajectories; the failure of telescopic search—all before this boat was sent to make a close approach. Nerves were thin.

Firespit! Rouvaratz thought. *Come off that. Doc O'Casey says we're in good shape.*

He spoke with care, his voice sounding hollow to him through the murmur of ventilators and air renewers, throb of thermonuclear powerplant, backpulse of the ion jets that splashed darkness with faint fire. "Look, sir, we're closer in than I like, and still haven't seen a thing. Maybe some absorption effect is blocking our radar—but damn it, we should be able to see an occulting disc with the naked eye by now! When I do get an indication, we may turn out to be so near that I'll have to cut blast immediately. You could take a bad tumble, maybe even crash into the controls, gone null-gee without warning. For your own safety, please go strap in."

"And for yours," Wheeler gibed.

"Well, I enjoy being alive."

“You don’t act like it.”

Rouvaratz didn’t bother to reply. He was habitually curt with his superiors. Even aboard the *Shikari,* he and the astrophysicist could hardly be said to move in the same social circles. A chance for privacy being as important as oxygen, on so long a cruise, cliques had inevitably formed within the gigantic hull. Wheeler did not roister and roughhouse with the engineer gang or party with the girls. Rouvaratz wondered what memories of Earth were dear to him. Surely not snowclad immensity on the Himalayas, or skipsailing in the salt wind across the Gulf of Mexico. (On a spaceship pilot’s salary, you could afford the cost of entering what few outdoor preserves survived.) Most double surely not soarwing racing, or small oddball taverns in low-level Chicago Complex.

Studying him, Wheeler relented. “Very well,” he said. “Perhaps I misunderstood. I was never further out before than Luna Prime Observatory. You, though, don’t realize—” He broke off and left the turret.

Rouvaratz stayed. But the stars crowded in on him, brilliant and heartless as diamonds, unwinking as snake’s eyes. He didn’t know why they should appear strange to him. The constellations hadn’t changed worth mentioning, in a mere billion and a half kilometers. Maybe the difference was that Sol had joined them, little more than the brightest of their horde. The things that were a man’s real awareness—play of muscles under the skin, breath in the nostrils, a gust of air across the face, odors of machine oil and one’s flesh—had lost their comfort.

He adjusted the spectroscope. Doppler shift in starlight gave a measure of velocity. So did the radio carrier wave from the distantly orbiting mother ship. A computer analyzed the data. Its screen declared that the boat was spinning furiously around the thing he could not detect.

He was startled to hear himself say into the intercom: “Let’s not fight, Professor. Could be I did speak too rough. What don’t I realize?”

“Eh?” Rouvaratz could hear the astrophysicist’s own astonishment, where he sat in his webbing among blank metal bulkheads. “Oh. Yes. You don’t know how important this is to me. I gave up much to join this expedition. And space is not kind to a middle-aged body. But for so rare and wonderful a phenomenon—” A laugh, uncertain but nonetheless unexpected, cracked through his words. “Why, I feel six years old again, on my birthday morning. Do you blame me for wanting to look at the gifts?”

Rouvaratz frowned, puzzled. Was a black dwarf that spectacular?

So they had told him. The Scientific Enterprise Board had long wanted to launch missions, telemetric probes at least, beyond the Solar System. But authorization was not forthcoming. Even the Gearchy must take taxpayers’ opinions into account when planning something so expensive, whose rewards would be delayed for years and would never amount to more than pure knowledge. There was no hostile word spoken, however, when a journey was proposed to the thing called Acheron.

For it passed through the System, ripping Uranus into a wild new orbit, troubling mighty Jupiter, changing the galactic track of the sun itself. Earth was little perturbed, and the Lunar instruments swung eagerly in search: optical, radio, X-ray, particle detectors.

They got no whisper of response, not a photon, not an electron, not so much as an eclipse. The lure which drew the *Shikari* was, in the end, blackness and blankness.

Sometimes Rouvaratz wondered why the hell he had come along. The best rationale he could find was that after he got back, if he did, he would have prestige which he could use to propagandize for a real interstellar trip. Tau Ceti, say; that one must have planets, and you could coldsleep during the decades of the voyage. God, to walk on a world uncluttered by cities and crowds and governments and police, a world unraped by man! But the chance of finding New Earth in his lifetime was negligible. His reason didn't make sense. Maybe he only wanted to kick the cosmos in the teeth.

"Have you noticed something?" Wheeler exclaimed.

Rouvaratz started, then grinned, "No. Sorry. I was woozing. Uh, I meant to ask why you're so excited. That is, I know this'll be the first body of its kind that has ever been observed. You might find some new law of nature. But aren't the odds against you? Doesn't theory pretty well predict what a star is like that's used up its last energy reserves?"

"Evidently not," Wheeler said. "It shouldn't be this…this invisible…unless it were a black hole—you know, a dead sun so compressed that light itself can't escape. And it hasn't enough mass to become one. Given a mass like Sol's, even in its extreme possible state of quantum degeneracy it should not be so small that we can't find it this close. Indeed, it probably shouldn't be dark at all; it ought to reflect rather brightly."

His aloofness vanished. "Pilot," he said, "if my hopes turn out to be justified, we will never see that star."

"Huh?"

"You don't know? Didn't your briefings include—"

"Nothing. I'm just a slob of a jet jockey, remember? The scientists had no time to waste on me. Go on."

"What we will see is a…a treasure of information…something unique in the galaxy, something to make me believe there really is a God who cares about us."

"What's that?"

"Please." Wheeler chuckled. "Let me have my fun. I should be able to tell you before long if I am right or not."

Rouvaratz clenched one big fist. "I want to know what the devil we're getting into," he said.

"If it's what I suspect, we can't possibly be hurt. If not, well, then I am as baffled as you. What is our current position?"

"Who knows, when we've got nothing to refer to except the computed centroid? But we're orbiting at 435 kilometers per second. If this were Sol, we'd be skimming the photosphere. We can't go much deeper into the gravitational well; wouldn't have enough reaction mass to get back out."

"The pull is, then, increasing as if this were a sunlike body—right?"

"Uh-huh. And it shouldn't. If that's a neutron star, a chunk of collapsed matter smaller than Earth, its field ought to drop off so sharply that—"

Then they were struck.

This far into emptiness, there had seemed no reason to sacrifice other capabilities for the sake of keeping meteoroid spotters at maximum scope. Furthermore, evasive maneuvers are handicapped when one is hard by a powerfully attracting mass. Accordingly, the boat's automata were unable to react in time.

Rouvaratz's first sensation was shock, A troll's fist slammed him against his harness and rattled his head in the open helmet. Fury toned through metal. Circuits arced over, the air smelled full of lightning. At once safety switches clashed open, the engines died, and the boat spun free. There was only the shriek of gases rushing out of the pierced hull.

“Close your faceplate!” he bawled automatically, and did so himself. His eardrums had almost burst as pressure dropped. But he had no chance to notice the pain, or be afraid, or do anything except whip through the motions of survival.

A glance across the instruments: most were functioning yet, he could see that the powerplant was undamaged, likewise the ion tubes. But one mass tank must have been cracked, letting liquid boil into space, for that indicator needle plummeted toward zero. Circuits printed in the vessel’s structure registered damage sites, He threw off his harness and vaulted weightless from the seat.

Now the boat held vacuum. Light from the fluorescents, from sun and stars, fell in undiffused puddles, with death-black shadows around. Rouvaratz gave a shove and sped aft, clawing himself along by the handholds. In the main section, the sky glared at him through a hole punched in the plates. Wreckage trailed aft, out a broken bulkhead and thus to the tank from which the smasher had made its exit. Bits and pieces floated wherever he looked, chaos unleashed in an elemental silence. He looked upon the ruined air renewer and wanted to vomit.

A spacesuited figure moved awkwardly in his direction. “Go away!” Rouvaratz yelled, with obscenities. Wheeler made scarecrow gestures. Rouvaratz realized his radio was off. He switched it on and said between clenched jaws: “Get out of my Goddamned way. You’ve killed us both, but I won’t let you interfere with my job.”

“But—but what—” Sunlight sickled past the gap in the side, casting Wheeler’s face into ghastly highlights. “What’s happened?”

Rouvaratz snarled, grabbed him, and hustled him to the berth cabin. “Strap in,” he ordered. “Sit till I send for you.”

The other man flinched from him. He heard a near whimper, grunted, and returned to the main section.

In the hour or two that followed, he worked some of the wrath out of himself. He must catch loose material, and make a general inspection, and weld on repair plates, and test everything, and finally release air from the reserve stock—a considerable task for a single man, with skill and coolness prerequisite.

He didn't hurry. The boat circled in a balance of forces that could prevail till the galaxy burned out. It was sheer, incredible bad luck that she had been hit, in so vast a volume of space. The odds against another strike were literally astronomical.

All it took, though, was one, he thought.

After he had raised the mother ship on the maser and reported, he could do little. So, in the end, he summoned Wheeler to the control turret. They might as well try to figure out what had doomed them.

Alarm bells rang. Crewfolk hastened to their posts. Messages stabbed forth, notifying those boats which had gone to investigate other regions around Acheron. The *Shikari* reassembled her two sections and got underway.

She moved with care. The hull which had crossed space at a hundred kilometers per second was an enormous bubble, more frail than any of the auxiliary vessels she bore. Her approach to the dark star, matching velocities and assuming orbit, had been as cautious a maneuver as anyone ever carried out.

The strain had eaten at Commander Nathans, even before word came of disaster. He felt very old, looking forth into the glittery dark. *You've taken* *two good men,* he thought. *You want the rest of us also, don't you?*

Janice Falconet had no duties at the moment. Everyone must be a trained technician, but her assignment was to maintain the scientific instruments. Now she could merely sit in her cabin, enclosed by vibrating metal, and try not to weep. She failed.

Maura O'Casey, the biomed, had joined her, sensing that the girl needed company. "Don't feel so badly, dear," she murmured, and let the blond head rest on her shoulder. "We aren't beaten yet. We'll get them back."

"We have to!" Janice cried.

"Now—" Maura checked herself. This was not the time to remind the other that casualties might well be expected. The cold and hollowness of space, blind brutality of matter with no friction or gravity to control it, cataracting radiation, that unseeable thing which had trapped the boat… Suddenly she understood that Janice's anguish was not from terror.

"You mean this is personal," she said.

"W-w-well, our friends, we've got to be friends out here, we're all alone —" Janice straightened and knuckled her eyes, hard.

"I doubt if Dr. Wheeler would affect you so," Maura said.

Janice stared. A shiver passed through, her.

"Did you sign on because of Karl Rouvaratz?"

Maura got no reply except for the quick, ragged breathing. "Doesn't matter, really," she sighed. "Same result if the attachment developed on board. You mustn't let it become too deep, you know."

"Why not?" the girl defied her.

"You know perfectly well why not. The situation was explained to you over and over before we left. Our margin of survival is too slim as is, without letting in emotional rivalries, jealousies, intrigues, or even grief at someone's death. Keeping temporary company is fine. Exclusive relationships are not." For a moment, Maura sounded wistful. "I've passed beyond that. Perhaps I've forgotten how it feels to be young."

Janice looked at her hands, twisted together in her lap, before answering. "I'm sorry," she said low. "I do have some daydreams about after we get home."

"Did—does Karl share them?"

"I don't know. He isn't the kind to, to reveal himself. He'll talk and joke like anyone else, most of the time. But he gets these silent moods. And he never says anything meaningful."

"Meaningful to a woman, that is." Maura smiled, "Well, we're going to be with Acheron for at least a year, and then it's a long haul back. That's ample opportunity to work on a man, *provided* you observe the social articles of the expedition meanwhile."

"I will," Janice said forlornly. The implication penetrated. She tautened. "What do you mean by 'at least a year'?"

"We could stay indefinitely. The ship is a closed ecological system. If we come on something interesting—"

"I won't! They can't! We contracted for one certain period. To grow old out here—"

"One step at a time, child," Maura counseled. "First we have to save those men."

If we can, her mind added. *I don't see how.*

Around and around the spaceboat hurtled, in a circle of nearly four and a half million kilometers' circumference. Chill enfolded her, wan sunlight fell on her flanks, the Milky Way rimmed her visual universe. Within the control turret, silence stretched like a drumhead over the little sounds of machinery and life. Rouvaratz could not grasp the thought that he fell through incandescence.

Storms raved, flames sheeted, light and heat flooded from that multibillion-year violence which is a star. He could not survive a fractional second. Nothing could. Yet his gauges showed vacuum outside, ordinary cosmic radiation, a weak plasma-borne magnetic field. His radio receiver hummed with the beam from the *Shikari*, rustled with spatial interference, the voice of nebulae and galaxies.

“I don’t get you,” he said. A part of him wondered if he was deliberately being commonplace, downright stupid: one way to assert humanness. He regarded Wheeler. The astrophysicist was in the emergency copilot’s seat by him. They could have talked over the intercom, but they needed each other’s presence. “Give me some detail about this theory of yours.”

“First, suppose you explain what our trouble is,” Wheeler retorted. His arrogance drew no anger now, it was so plainly a defense. He was chalk-white and a tic had developed in one eyelid.

“A probe rocket hit us,” Rouvaratz said. “One of the first that we shot off, from the mother ship as we came into range. The batteries ran down and it wasn’t emitting any longer. You recall some probes were telesteered into close orbits around the computed centroid, to see how they’d behave and so give the math boys a line on what Acheron is like.”

“Kindly don’t patronize me!” Wheeler paused and gulped. “No, I’m sorry. My nerves are on edge. Tell me in any way you like.”

“Well, before the transmissions stopped, the orbits of the rocket shells had been figured out. Highly eccentric, for some reason, but we used an approach curve that ought not to have brought us anywhere near one of ’em. Only somehow, somebody was mistaken. I think I see why.”

“Me too.” Wheeler nodded, jerkily. “The predictions of where the rockets would be were made on the assumption that Acheron is a neutron star, small and ultra-dense. Since the case is otherwise—yes, rapid precession; and the force-field itself varies unpredictably, according to variations in density within the star. I should have—No. Since the paths were, as I say, unpredictable, you and I would have had to accept the risk anyway.”

Rouvaratz choked. He came near hitting the older man. “That’s not so!” he rasped. “If you brain-rotted snobs had told me what Acheron maybe was, I could’ve guessed at this danger and taken precautions—Argh!” He couldn’t go on.

Wheeler sat quiet until the pilot seemed calmer. Then the astrophysicist said, as dryly as might be, “If you think you are entitled to an apology, please accept mine. But no one intended to slight you. They simply didn’t think you would be interested in what, remember, all the specialists but me considered a most remote possibility.”

Rouvaratz said nothing. Wheeler grimaced and went on: “It’s true, the data from the probes did not accord with Acheron being an ultra-dense ball. But there is good reason to think neutron stars may have extensive atmospheres. That would account equally well for the behavior of the rockets—and, indeed, would make them crash on the central globe before this boat arrived.

“The only solid evidence I had for my belief was that we failed to locate the star optically. And this could be explained, under some rather forced assumptions, by the light-bending properties of—”

Rouvaratz decided to be mollified before he was talked to death. “Okay,” he interrupted, “maybe you domebrains weren’t being stupid. Maybe nature just took you by surprise. But in any case, you and me are in a box. We can spend what mass we’ve got left to recede quite a ways from Acheron. But we can’t make rendezvous with *Shikari* or any other boat. They can’t get near enough. This was the only craft with so much velocity-change capability that she could duck this far down into the star’s gravity well and climb back up.”

“But can they not send us extra mass—oh, say aboard an unmanned auxiliary?”

“Huh! You don’t know what it takes to lay alongside an object like that, under these kind of velocities,” Rouvaratz shrugged. “We can try, of course. We plan to. But I have my doubts if we’ll succeed. And we won’t get more than one or two tries, you understand. Our air renewer is smashed beyond fixing with anything we have aboard. We’ve got a few days’ worth of oxy in reserve. After that, goodbye, chum.”

Wheeler bit his lip.

“We’re not in any rush at the moment,” Rouvaratz said. “The *Shikari*—all the boats—will take a while to reach this neighborhood. So we wouldn’t gain anything by starting our outward spiral for some hours yet. Before we commit ourselves to that…well, maybe we can think of a better way. Go on, man. Explain yourself. What the devil is this shadow matter of yours?”

Wheeler sniffed. “I don’t see how a supposedly educated man has failed to hear about one of the most basic items in physics.”

“Damn you,” Rouvaratz growled, “I don’t see how anybody can call himself educated who doesn’t know diddlysquat about how the machine he’s riding in works.” With an effort, he smoothed his tone. “Could be the idea was mentioned in one of my classes, but not emphasized, so I forgot. We both had too much to learn, you and me, in our different specialties. Besides, the Gearchy doesn't encourage really liberal education. That might start people thinking."

As expected, Wheeler was shocked out of his pique. Rouvaratz laughed with scant humor. "Never mind. I always was a malcontent. Go on, Professor. If I've caught your drift, there's supposed to be another universe besides our own. The shadow universe, you call it? How can it be?"

"The idea was first advanced in the...the twentieth century, I believe, to account for certain anomalies," Wheeler said. Talking, he gradually lost himself, until he was a lecturer and almost happy. "You see, the long-lived component of the neutral K meson beam was found apparently to exhibit the two-pion decay mode, which would have violated the principle of CP invariance. That principle was so important that several attempts were made to construct a theory which would preserve it while explaining the data. The one which succeeded was the one which postulated the shadow universe. In fact, the hypothesis proved so fruitful that at last, in a modified and more elaborate form, it was incorporated into the body of fundamental physics. Of course, hitherto it was useful for nothing except theoretical calculations, so I must conclude it is not too surprising that you are not familiar with the concept.

"To continue. You have another universe of matter and energy, occupying the same space-time as ours and not dissimilar. But there is no strong interaction between the particles of these two universes. Thus we cannot detect shadow matter, or even shadow photons; they do not act upon our electromagnetic fields, or we on theirs.

"Weak interactions are not forbidden, however. This includes the K meson decay for which the theory was first advanced. There is a certain probability of a Kt meson yielding two shadow pions, which then become undetectable by us.

"And, to be sure, gravitation is a weak force."

Like hell! Rouvaratz thought. *What if it's doing to this boat…But no. The whole mass of a star can't yank us to 500 KPS. Through that'll do to kill us.*

He shook himself a little, for his idea was an eerie one, and asked, "How come we can't spot pions from the other universe's K mesons?"

"Oh, we could, given sufficient concentration," Wheeler replied. "Within Acheron, for example. Do you realize now why I was so excited? When it passed through the System, already then I dared hope it might really be a shadow sun. The possibility was discounted by everyone else, which I suppose is the reason it was never mentioned in the news accounts. But as we began to gather data, I grew more and more convinced. That's why I insisted on being the man to come with you.

"A shadow sun!" He spoke as Lancelot might have spoken of the Grail, and tears stood in his eyes. "A thing we can probe, even enter ourselves with a specially built ship. We can trace out density gradients and their time variations, infer details of nuclear reactions, learn what men had resigned themselves to never learning. Quite probably our discoveries will revolutionize the whole of physics. And high time, too. They've gotten smug and stagnant on Earth, they think everything is known and nothing is left to do but add the next decimal point. If we could find another race on another planet, comparable to us but with a new outlook, a new knowledge and philosophy—" His tone sank. "But too few people are willing to make such an effort. The shadow star might perhaps serve as well."

Satan on a rocket! Rouvaratz thought in surprise. *The old bastard is human after all. He's damn near likable.*

He brought himself back to questions. "I guess what we'd observe would be two pions appearing out of nowhere," he said. Wheeler agreed. "Then why haven't we ever done so?"

"Because the concentration of shadow matter in the region of Sol is too small," the scientist explained. "The chance of such an event is infinitesimal. That's quite plausible, of course. Space is mostly empty. No doubt we lie somewhere between galaxies, as far as the shadow universe is concerned.

"The theory has had great cosmological value. The existence of two complexes makes the interstellar medium twice as dense as it would otherwise be, gravitationally speaking. That helps account for the observed distribution of our own galaxies. But still, this is a fantastically lucky accident, that we have found this actual sample."

"Luck? Huh!" Rouvaratz managed a grin. "Well, I suppose you could say so. How'd it happen, do you think?"

"I daresay Acheron escaped from its home galaxy. The speed suggests as much."

"Planets?"

"Why not? We can find them by their gravitational effects." Wheeler returned to immediate reality. "But I admit our first aim must be to escape. Are you quite certain that our prospect of matching up with a reaction mass carrier is poor?"

"I am," Rouvaratz said. His flicker of philosophical interest died out.

"Ah…what about some less conventional procedure? Don't forget, this is an unconventional situation. You may be so used to thinking in terms of ordinary astronautics that—"

"Shut up!" Rouvaratz exploded.

He clamped his fists together. Rage mounted anew, driving out all else. He could stand dying—but for some better reason than a stupid failure of communication between men from two social orders. And in some better way than suffocation, the husk of him rattling forever around this phantom of a sun. *Let me go like my father,* he thought, *in battle, with something real to hold on to and fight with. Let me charge my enemy head on.*

Charge!

An oath tore from him. Wheeler asked what he meant. Rouvaratz ignored the question, scarcely heard. His lips moved with unspoken calculation and he stared out at the stars like a blind man.

Then he cracked down the maser switch and barked, "Hello, *Shikari.* Me here. Get me Navigator Chai, and have him make ready to do some high-powered figuring."

Waiting was the hardest part. Commander Nathans grew yet more shriveled and gray while the time passed. Silence filled the bridge, the whole interior of the ship. Those who were aboard stared at each other, and away again, and fumbled with things. Janice Falconet sat hard by Maura O'Casey, but a shadow wall had risen around her and words or gestures did not seem to penetrate.

Sweat runneled from Chai and his gang where they hunched over their instruments. No telescope they had would reveal what was happening, at the distance which the mother ship must keep. Radar had lost the boat and could not find her; likewise the communications beam. Nothing but the radiation of her jets tracked her as she plunged into Acheron.

Into: down toward the core of the sun, where pressures reached the millions of atmospheres, temperatures the millions of degrees, where atoms were stripped bare and flung together with such ferocity that they fused and burned. Yet to men, those were ghosts, untouchable, unreal. Reality was the roar and shudder of thrust, barbarous acceleration, the grip of a mass as great as Sol's.

One could imagine: Rouvaratz among the thunders, eyes locked to instruments, fingers slugging across controls, sweat rivering over his own skin, his weight become nearly too huge a burden to bear. Yet he must drive, with nigh absolute precision, through shifting vectors that had been calculated for him—knowing the whole while that the computation was based on a handful of data, a hatful of theory, and might be altogether wrong.

One could imagine: Wheeler in his couch, frail frame dragged down into itself till bones creaked and heartbeat stuttered, maybe fainted, maybe dead.

One could imagine: the boat spouting flame across heaven, then running for some minutes inert, reeled in by the shadow sun, until time came to swing onto a new line and leap once more under power.

Inward—around the star's core—then the ultimate acceleration, everything the jets could give, everything the pilot could endure.

For the energy of reaction mass is not only kinetic. It has a potential component, due to its position in some given gravity field. Had the boat followed normal procedure and spiraled out, none of the potential would have been realized. Indeed, kinetic energy would have been spent simply to raise unexhausted mass higher.

Falling, the boat was flung in a cometary path around the centroid of Acheron. At the moment when her direction was reversed and she headed back out, she made her great effort; all else had just been to steer her into that orbit. Rather than being carried up again, her reaction mass was left behind, near the bottom of the gravity well, where it could supply the maximum energy.

The principle is simple. Oberth himself first noticed it, when space flight lived nowhere but in the dreams of a few. It is, in fact, routinely used in plotting departure maneuvers from the vicinity of a planet. Rouvaratz had not thought of it at once because he, like every pilot, was conditioned to stay well clear of the sun. Suns eat people.

Acheron did not. None of its blaze could touch a man. But of course the computation had been difficult. The boat was not to swing around a point mass, but to go through a stellar object of varying density. The law of attraction was no longer Newton's familiar inverse-square rule; it had trigonometric factors. And too many parameters could only be guessed at.

On the mother ship, on every boat, they waited.

"Here they come! I've got them!" The animal part of the radarman screamed the words. His hands danced over the knobs with a life of their own. Numbers poured forth, were analyzed in seconds, told Navigator Chai what was happening.

Breath gusted from his lungs. "They made it," he said. "They've got more than escape velocity. Much more."

He vanished into mathematics. When he emerged, he knew how the boat was orbiting and which auxiliary could best make rendezvous when she was far enough out. Commands raced over the maser.

No token came from Rouvaratz. Perhaps he was dead. Even with modern anti-acceleration drugs, no one should have had to take such pressure. Perhaps weight had broken some part of his communications system. In any event, time must pass before the other boat could join him. Once more men had to wait.

And wait.

Until the speaker croaked: “Rouvaratz to *Shikari*. I think I’ve centered you. Do you read me?”

“Yes, yes, yes! How are you?”

More waiting, while photons crossed space and back again.

“Operational, I think.”

“Wheeler?”

“I don’t know. I just came back to consciousness myself, and he’s not very strong. No response from him. I’m about to go have a look.” The breath whistled through Rouvaratz’s teeth. “Stars out yonder,” he mumbled. “Hello, universe.”

Maura O’Casey released him from sickbay after twenty-four hours. It felt good to have weight underfoot; the *Shikari* was spiraling out of Acheron’s presence at a steady one gee. Prolonged free fall was not simply bad for you physically, however much counteracting pharmacopoeia you loaded yourself with, he thought. Some kind of insult as well—for him, at any rate. He wanted to use his muscles.

Now he’d get the chance. O’Casey didn’t want him piloting till he was entirely recovered. The *Shikari* would assume a reasonable orbit, divide her sections, link them with five kilometers of whisker-wire cable, and go into a centrifuging spin.

He chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Janice asked. She held his arm closely, as they walked down the bare, thrumming corridor.

"A tag. The little star that isn't there."

She shivered. "Don't speak of that thing. It nearly killed you."

"Well, it tried, but not quite hard enough. Even Wheeler should be back in commission after a week or two. Last time I looked in, he was giving Doc hell. Wants loose already, to start probing Acheron."

Janice winced. "How I wish it had been what we supposed. A cinder, not a ghost."

"By its lights, we're the ghosts. More so. It probably has planets, and maybe one or two of the planets have life. In this universe, we're all the life there is from here to Sol."

"I know, I know," she whispered. "I remember in my nightmares."

"So we—Hoy!"

The intercom voice rolled down the passageways. Echoes gave an iron resonance, not entirely human. But the speaker was only little Commander Nathans.

"General announcement. General announcement. I, ah, I think everyone will be interested. A discovery has been made like—frankly, I have trouble believing it myself. Word has come in from Boat Four, pilot Krishnamurti and physicist Oliveira. You know that, er, as soon as the rescue was effected, what with the boats being in the region of the shadow sun anyway, we started them on a search for planets. Well, a planet has been found. It is of approximately Earth's mass, about one astronomical unit from the primary. The boat is now in surface orbit around it and, ah, certain tests which Dr. Wheeler suggested are being prepared. Over.”

Rouvaratz stood still, then suddenly slapped his thigh with a pistol noise and shouted, “How about that?”

“Yes, yes,” Janice said through tense lips. “But—”

“Don’t you get the point?” He grabbed her shoulders with bruising force. “Earth-type planet around a Sol-type star. Almost bound to be life!”

“Specters,” she said in a shaken tone. “We’ll never know. One more thing to make us lie awake.”

“But maybe we will find out! I’ve been thinking. And Wheeler and I talked some while we waited to be picked up. If Acheron escaped from its home galaxy, well, that must’ve been one whale of a time ago. You don’t cross a million or so lightyears overnight. So the planet must be old. Older than Earth. It’s had time for intelligence to evolve and…and grow beyond us—Don’t you see?”

She flushed with rebellion. “No, I don’t. That is, you may be right, but how can we ever tell?”

“Mesons. Any large nuclear powerplants they have must be grinding out so many K mesons on the side that we can spot the pions that get formed in our own universe. If we do, then we can rig a beam generator of our own. Get into the same orbit, right at the planetary center. Fire our beam so fast that we get the benefit of relativistic time contraction and it doesn’t decay too far before it reaches the surface. Use a rotating system, so we always hit the same point. A point where we know there is a powerplant. Somebody ought to be on hand to detect and reply to us—”

“If, if, if!” she exclaimed, not far from tears. “Go ahead and try. You won’t get any answer out of your damned ghosts!”

They did.

Ten men and ten women filled the common room of the *Shikari.* The artists among them had attempted to brighten the place with murals, but somehow those wistful landscapes only underlined a starkness. The sounds of breath, muttered conversation, shuffled feet and chairs slid back, like the endless hum of the ship herself, flickered above immortal silence.

Commander Nathans rose and faced them. He had driven this vessel across desolation, and he could still drive her home. But the years had gnawed him, until he could no longer direct his people against their wills. Small, stooped, faintly trembling, he said:

"You, ah, you know why we are met. But I think best that, ah, the issue be summarized. Otherwise, well, we might waste valuable time talking at cross purposes.

"There is life on Shadow Earth. Intelligent life, with a technology at least equal to ours and probably superior. We know this because our meson-pion bursts produced a very quick response, a corresponding set of bursts aimed directly at the center of the planet where the boat was. This proves an instant comprehension of what, ah, what was going on. It also proves an ability to send a particle beam straight through their world. Whether they have a tunnel, or use some induction effect, or whatever, this is something man cannot do. And they must be eager to communicate."

"I should think so!" Rouvaratz barked. "Judas! Through their entire history, they've been in what they see as intergalactic space. Not another star in sight, nothing but a few spiral wisps. I bet they took a million years to go from farming to science. They know they've passed by a sun they can't spot, and that's the whole of what they know. Those poor, lonely devils!"

“Please.” Nathans winced. “Such things have been said very often in the past several watches. This is a business meeting.”

“But damnation, the business is emotional. We have to decide what we want to do.” Janice plucked at Rouvaratz’s arm. He grumbled and subsided.

“The problem is this,” Nathans said, “Pions offer a means of communication. We can go from a pulse code to…anything, theoretically. In time, we can even exchange pictures, for example by specifying points on a diagram. But that will take a great deal of time and effort. We will have to build a far more elaborate setup than, er, anything a boat can carry. In fact, we shall have to establish the *Shikari* within Shadow Earth and make our research center there. Then we must experiment, and develop our equipment, and commence the slow process of constructing a mutual language. The project will require years just to start. Centuries will not exhaust it, I am sure. But you are enlisted for a one-year stay. Ah…under the articles of the expedition, barring emergencies, a two-thirds majority is required to modify those articles. Thereafter the minority is bound by them.

“In short, we must vote whether to remain or return. The floor is now open to discussion.”

Hands flew high. “Dr. Wheeler?” Nathans said.

The astrophysicist rose. Zeal flamed from him. “Everybody knows my wishes,” he said. “A year—no, less—hardly suffices to begin studying Acheron. I would gladly give the rest of my life to that. But of course you aren’t all my colleagues. So I would like to remind you what Shadow Earth can mean. A whole world—a geology, meteorology, oceanography, chemistry, biology—an entire civilization, with its own long experience, its arts and philosophies—yes, its science, too. Conceivably, fantastic thought but perhaps, they can give us a method to travel faster than light. Thus the whole galaxy would be opened to mankind. But quite without any such result, what we can tell Earth will be like nothing Earth has imagined. We must stay. It is our duty."

"Chief Montelius? I gather you are in opposition."

"I am," said the boss engineer. "I've got kinfolk at home. If Earth wants to know more about the shadow universe, they can send another expedition, manned by people who're willing to go. Me, I'll stay put."

Janice halted a cheer.

"Ah...no, no, Dr. Wheeler, please wait your next turn...Dr. Settle?"

"I'm not sure that Earth would send another ship," said the plasma dynamics man. "I'll speak frankly and trust that no one will repeat my remarks if we do return. The decision would lie with the Gearch. And he will probably think twice. A scientific and philosophical revolution would bring a social revolution. He needn't flatly refuse. It would do to maintain that, since Acheron is after all getting farther away, the notion is unfeasible."

Rouvaratz sprang to his feet. "That's right!" he shouted.

"You're out of order," Nathans protested.

"Sorry. But listen." The big form loomed over the assembly, half wrathful, half pleading. "When did a government that has to gun down its own people ever want something really new? It was okay to give the scientists their toys. An expedition to some useless dead star kept them happy, and also kept them away from human affairs where they might've gotten interested in things like freedom. But this? No! I've been there, I tell you.

"If we stay, and beam back what we learn, they won't have any choice but to send another ship with more equipment. The Gearchy depends on the technician class to keep the world running. Get those boys interested—and once we start sending home some real information, they will be—the government'll have to give in and hope for the best. Then you can go home, if you want."

"We're receding every second," Janice wailed. "The new ship would have to be built—and get here—How many years?"

Chaos broke loose. Everyone was up, clamoring into his neighbor's mouth. Nathans spoke and was not heard.

Rouvaratz jumped to the front of the room. He filled his lungs and bellowed across the tumult. *"Quiet!* Pipe down or I'll start breaking some heads!"

"Go on and try," Montelius said, red-faced.

Rouvaratz looked at him, from a greater height and from his own youth, before saying with a gentleness that sliced through the dying racket: "You're my friend, Conrad, and I'd sure hate to get rough with you. But I can, and you know it."

"Karl," Janice pleaded. The sound reached his ears but not his brain.

He roared them to order and then funneled all the vitality there was in him into his words and his presence.

"Look," he said. "You want to leave, some of you. Go back to the green hills of Earth. What green hills? If you're rich, you can find a square kilometer here and there not cluttered by some stinking human warren. If you're willing to do as the state tells you, you can live nice and peaceful, like an ox in a stall. But I don't think you're that kind. You wouldn't have come in the first place if you were.

"We won't have a bad life where we are. We've got room aboard ship. If we disassemble the drive units, we can have twice as much room. Those who want can redecorate the place. Good Lord, didn't the old-time monks get along on less?

"And we won't be sitting around bored, either. Those fellows on Shadow Earth are smart. I'll bet you googolplex plutons that they'll find a way to establish meaningful talk with us inside a year or two. As we start to learn what they know, why, we'll be building apparatus and conducting experiments till hell wouldn't have us, Okay, maybe ship number two won't arrive soon. But we'll not be old when she does. Me, I'd like to stick around afterward, too. Unless we've gotten us a Shadow Earth type boat which'll take us around the galaxy. Have we any right to deny our race a chance like that? Or the million other chances that we really can be sure will come?

"But never mind. I'm no damn altruist myself. I only say we can have fun here—more fun than any men or women have had since Columbus took off. How about that?"

There is a mystery and magic in power. Call it bandwagon psychology, call it charisma, call it *mana:* you have still merely tacked a name to what you don't understand. Nathans had given his away, to this ship and to those he had commanded before her. Wheeler had never had any. But in today's confrontation, Karl Rouvaratz was physically the strongest creature aboard. That, shouldn't have mattered; a fight was out of the question. However, in some jungle fashion it did matter. And he was stronger yet in his psyche, for he knew exactly what he wanted.

He made enough of them want it too.

Afterward, when they were alone in his cabin, Janice regarded him for a long while. She did not cry. Despair was behind her.

“I guess I should apologize,” he said uncomfortably. “To you, anyway.”

“No need.” Her words fell flat into a mechanical murmur around them.

“I know you’d rather go home and raise kids and—”

“Not you, though.” She attempted a smile. “So I’d better change my mind.”

After a pause, she went on, “But I can’t help wondering. Why do you want to stay…here, locked in metal for the rest of your life, with nothing around you but unreachable stars? You’re no scientist yourself. You won’t be talking to Shadow Earth.”

“Someday I will,” he said. “With my opposite number, a space pilot in their universe.”

“Oh, yes, you have your Quixote dream of a galactic drive. But the hope is so tiny. You must admit that; you’re no fool. And as for everything else, the science, the engineering, the fresh new outlook if it isn’t too alien for us—even what changes might happen on Earth—those are sort of religious goals, and you’re not a very religious man. Why, Karl? Revenge?”

“I don’t think so.” He sat down on the bunk beside her.

“What, then?”

Something I have this minute, right in my hand.” His gaze left her, went to the bulkhead and saw visions beyond, Polaris, Andromeda, the whole sister cosmos. “Freedom. I’m my own man now.”

TRADER TEAM

-1-

Poker is not a very good three-handed game, so the crew of the trade pioneer ship *Muddlin' Through* had programmed her computer to play with them. It bought chips with IOU's. Being adjusted to an exactly average level of competence, it just about balanced winnings and losses in the course of a mission. This freed the crew to go after each other's blood.

"Two cards," said its mechanical voice. David Falkayn dealt them onto a scanner plate that he had rigged at one end of the saloon table. An arm projecting from a modified waldo box shoved the discards aside. Down in their armored tank, at the middle of the ship, think cells assessed the new odds.

"One," said Chee Lan.

"None for me, thank you," rumbled Adzel.

Falkayn gave himself three and picked up his hand. He'd improved: a pair of treys to match his kings. Adzel might well stand pat on nothing better, and Chee had probably tried to complete a flush; the first round of betting, opened by the machine, had been unenthusiastic. But Muddlehead itself, now—

The steel arm dropped a blue chip into the pot.

"Damn!" shrieked Chee. Her tail bottled out to twice its normal size, the silky-white fur stood erect over her whole small body, and she threw her cards down so hard that the tabletop ought to have rung. "Pestilence upon you! I hate your cryogenic guts!"

Imperturbably, Adzel doubled the bet. Falkayn sighed and folded. Chee's fury ebbed as fast as it had come. She settled down on her elevated stool and began washing, cat-fashion. Falkayn reached for a cigarette.

Muddlehead raised back. Adzel's dragon countenance wasn't able to change expression, except for the rubbery lips, but his huge scaly form, sprawled across the cabin, grew tense. He studied his cards again.

A bell tone interrupted him. That part of the computer which was always on watch had observed something unusual.

"I'll go," Falkayn said. He rose and went quickly down the forward passageway: a tall and muscled young man, yellow-haired, blue-eyed, snub-nosed, and high of cheek bone. Even here, lightyears from the nearest fellow human, he wore lounging pajamas that would not have been out of place in Tycho Lodge. He told himself that he was obliged to maintain standards—younger son of a baronial house on Hermes, currently a representative of the Polesotechnic League, and all that sort of thing—but the fact was that he had not quite outgrown a certain vanity.

At the midsection scanner turret, he punched controls. No oddities appeared in the screen. What the devil had the observer units noticed? So much computer capacity was engaged in the game that the ship herself couldn't tell him. Maybe he'd better—He shifted the cigarette in his mouth and increased the magnification.

Westward in a deep purplish sky, the sun stood at eternal late afternoon. It was a K0 dwarf, barely one-tenth as luminous as man's home star, furnace red. But at a mere third of an astronomical unit from Ikrananka, it showed nearly three and a half times the angular diameter and gave about as much irradiation. Through the dull light and thin air, a few other stars were visible. Spica, little more than three parsecs away, shone like a white jewel. Otherwise the heavens held nothing but a flock of leathery-winged flying beasties and, above the northern heights, the yellow cloud of a dust storm.

Halfway up a hill, *Muddlin' Through* commanded a wide overlook of the Chakora. That former sea bottom stretched ruddy-green and indigo shadowed, densely planted with low succulent crops. Here and there on it Falkayn could see clusters of buildings, woven in patterns from gaily colored fibers, each surrounding a stone tower: the thorps and defensive keeps of agricultural families. Wherever a spring seeped forth, the vegetation became intensely verdant and gold. And there thickets of long stalks, like plumed bamboo, the closest this world had ever come to trees, swayed in the wind.

The hill itself was craggy, eroded, with little except scrub growing between the boulders. On its top loomed the ramparts of Haijakata. At the foot was a tower guarding the town's well, accessible from above through a tunnel. Nearby, a dirt road from the east twisted to enter the gates. Falkayn didn't see any natives abroad.

No, wait. Dust smoked on that highway, three or four kilometers off but rapidly nearing. Somebody was bound here in an awful hurry.

Falkayn adjusted the scanner. The scene leaped at him.

Half a dozen Ikranankans were urging their zandaras on. The big, brown-furred, thick-tailed bipeds rose in soaring arcs, touched earth, instantly gathered their leg muscles and sprang again. The riders shook lances and sabers aloft. Their open beaks showed that they screamed.

A breeze blew aside the dust and Falkayn saw what they were pursuing. He just avoided swallowing his cigarette.

“No,” he heard himself feebly say. “Such things don’t happen, I swear they don’t.”

His paralysis broke. He whirled and ran back aft. At a mere sixty-five percent of Terrestrial gravity, he moved like a scared comet. He burst into the saloon, skidded to a halt, and roared, “Emergency!”

Chee Lan hopped across the table and switched the computer back to normal function. Adzel thrust a final chip into the pot and turned over his cards. He had a straight. “What is the matter?” Chee asked, glacially self-possessed as always when trouble showed.

“A…a woman,” Falkayn panted. “Being chased.”

“By whom?”

“Not me, dammit. But listen, it’s so! Bunch of native cavalry after a human female. Her zandara looks tired. They’ll catch her before she gets here, and Lord knows what they’ll do.”

While Falkayn was blurting, Adzel looked at Muddlehead’s hand. Full house. He sighed philosophically and shoved the pot over. Rising, he said, “Best we go remonstrate with them. Chee, stand by.”

The Cynthian nodded and pattered off to the bridge. Adzel followed Falkayn to the lower exit. His cloven hooves clanged on the deck. At the locker, the man slipped on a gun belt and stuck a radio transceiver into a pocket of the coat he grabbed. They valved through.

To avoid delays when going out, they maintained interior air pressure at local norm, about three-fourths of Earth sea level. But they preferred more warmth and moisture. Swift, dry, and chill, the wind struck savagely at Falkayn's mucous membranes. His eyes needed a moment to adapt. Adzel picked him up in two great horny hands and set him on his own back, just behind the centauroid torso. The Wodenite had had one of the sharp plates which jutted from his head, along his spine to the end of his tail, removed for that purpose. He started downhill in a smooth gallop. His musky odor blew back around Falkayn.

"One supposes that another ship has come," he said, his basso as placid as if they were still dealing cards. "By accident?"

"Must be." Falkayn squinted ahead. "She's dressed funny, though. Could she have run afoul of barbarian raiders? We do keep getting hints of war in the Sundhadarta mountains."

He could barely make out the highest peaks of that range, glooming above the eastern horizon. On his left marched the tawny cliffs which had once been a continental shelf. To the right lay only the evergreen fields of the Chakora. Behind him reared Haijakata hill, and his ship like a shining spearhead. But the view here had grown deadly familiar. He wasn't sorry for a bit of action. No danger to speak of; that gang would probably head for home and mother the minute they saw Adzel.

Muscles rippled between his thighs. The cloven air shrilled and nipped his ears. Hoofbeats drummed. And now, ahead, he could clearly see the girl and her pursuers. Harsh nonhuman yelps reached him.

She waved and spurred her flagging zandara to a last rush. The Ikranankans shouted to each other. Falkayn caught a few words—why, they spoke the Katandaran language perfectly—

One of them halted his beast and unshipped a crossbow from his saddle. It was a slender weapon. His arms had merely half a man's strength to cock it. But the darts it threw were needle sharp and traveled far in this gravity, he fired. The missile zipped within centimeters of her loosened auburn braids. He cried an order while he fitted another dart. Two more riders unlimbered their own bows.

"Judas on Pluto!" Falkayn gasped. "They mean to kill her!"

Every sense he had surged to full alertness. He looked through red-tinged dust and ruby light as if he were face to face with the closest autochthon.

The being stood some one hundred fifty centimeters tall. In body he resembled a barrel-chested, wasp-waisted man with unduly long, thin limbs. Sleek brown fur covered him; he was warm-blooded and omnivorous, and his mate brought forth her young alive; but for all that, he was no mammal. Atop a slender neck, his bowling-ball head sported a black ruff, pale eyes, donkey-like ears, and a corvine beak that might have been molded in amber. His padded feet were bare so the three long toes on each could grip stirrups. Otherwise he wore tight cross-gartered pants, a leather cuirass with iron shoulder pieces and a zigzag insigne on the breast, and a wide belt from which there hung dagger and saber. Three sharp-nailed fingers and a thumb cranked the bow taut. His right hand lifted the stock.

Falkayn snatched forth his blaster and fired upward. It was a warning; also, the beam dazzled native eyes and spoiled their aim. The girl cheered.

The squad at her back scattered. They were all accoutered more or less alike. The kinship symbol they shared was not familiar to Falkayn. Their leader screeched a command. They rallied and charged on. A dart buzzed near the man. Another broke on Adzel's scales.

"Why—why—they have decided to kill us, too," the Wodenite stammered. "They must have been prepared for the sight of us."

"Get going!" Falkayn howled.

He was born and bred an aristocrat on a planet where they still needed soldiers. Boyhood training took over in him. Gone metal steady, he narrowed his fire beam for maximum range and dropped one zandara in its tracks.

Adzel opened up. His ton of mass accelerated to a sprint of one hundred fifty KPH. Wind whipped blindingly in Falkayn's eyes. But he wasn't needed any more. Adzel had gotten in among the Ikranankans. He simply bowled over the first animal and rider. Two others spun through the air in a bow wave. His tail struck to one side, and that flattened a fourth. The last two bolted off across the fields.

Adzel braked himself and trotted back. A couple of the opposition were hotfooting it elsewhere, the other casualties seemed barely able to move. "Oh, dear," he said. "I do hope we did not injure them seriously."

Falkayn shrugged. A race of giants could afford to be gentler than men. "Let's get back to the ship," he said.

The girl had stopped further down the road. As they neared her, his lips shaped a whistle.

Perhaps she was a little too muscular for his taste. But what a figure! Tall, full, long-legged and straight-backed…and her outfit showed delightfully much of it, what with half-length boots, fur kilt hiked up for riding, doublet appropriately curved over a sleeveless blouse, and a short blue cloak. She was armed with cutlery similar to the natives', had a painted shield hung by her saddle and a flat helmet over her rusty coils of hair. Her skin was very white. The features had an almost Hellenic clearness, with big gray eyes and wide mouth to soften them.

"What *ho!"* Falkayn murmured. "And where are you from, lass?"

She wiped sweat off her brow and breathed hard, which was pleasant to see. Adzel continued lumbering down the road. She clucked to her zandara. It walked alongside, too exhausted to be skittish of his enormousness.

"You…are…are in truth from Beyond-the-World?" she asked. Her husky Anglic held an accent he had never met before.

"Yes. I suppose so." Falkayn pointed to the ship.

She traced a sign. "*Algat* is good!" The word was local, meaning approximately "magic."

Recovering some composure, she peered after her enemies. They had restored order, but weren't giving chase. Even as she watched, one of them on an unharmed animal started off, hell for leather, toward the far side of the hill. The rest followed slowly.

She reached out to touch Falkayn's hand, as if to make sure he was real. "Only rumors drifted usward," she said low. "We heard a strange Ershokh had arrived in a flying chariot, and the Emperor forbade anyone to come near. But the story could've grown in telling. You are truly from Beyond-the-World? Even from Earth?"

"I said yes," he answered. "But what are you talking about? What do you mean, *Ershokh?"*

"Humans. Did you not know? They call us Ershoka in Katandara." She considered him, and it was as if a mask slid over her. With a slowness and caution he did not understand, she ventured: "Ever since our ancestors came, over four hundred years ago."

“Four hundred?” Falkayn’s jaw hit his Adam’s apple. “But the hyperdrive wasn’t invented then!”

“Obviously she means Ikranankan years,” said Adzel, who was hard to surprise. “Let me see, with a revolution period of seventy-two standard days…yes, that makes about seventy-five Terrestrial years.”

“But—I say, how the deuce—”

“They were bound elsewhere to…what is the word…to be colonists,” the girl said. “Robbers captured them and left them here, the whole five hundred.”

Falkayn tried to make his mind stop whirling. Vaguely he heard Adzel say, “Ah, yes, doubtless a squadron from the Pirate Suns, venturing so far from their bases in the hope of just such valuable booty as a large ship. They were not interested in ransom. But it was meritorious of them to find a habitable planet and maroon rather than kill their prisoners.” He patted her shoulder. “Do not fret, small female. The Polesotechnic League has long since taught the Pirate Sun dwellers the error of their ways.”

Falkayn decided that any comforting should be done by him. “Well!” he beamed. “What a sensation this will make! As soon as we tell Earth, they’ll send transportation for you.”

Still she watched him, strangely and disappointingly careful. A damsel lately in distress ought not to act that way. “You are an Ersho—I mean an Earthman?”

“Actually I’m a citizen of the Grand Duchy of Hermes, and my shipmates are from other planets. But we operate out of Earth. David Falkayn’s my name.”

“I am Stepha Carls, a lieutenant in the household troops of—” She broke off. “No matter now.”

"Why were those klongs chasing you?"

She smiled a little. "One thing at a time, I beg. So much to tell each other, truth?" But then she did drop her reserve. Her eyes widened, her smile went up to about fifty megawatts, she clapped her hands and cried: "Oh, this is purest wonder! A man from Earth—my own rescuer!"

Well, now, Falkayn thought, a bit stunned, *that's more like it.* He dropped his questions and simply admired the scenery. After all, he'd been away from humankind for a good many weeks.

At the ship they tethered the zandara to a landing jack. Falkayn bowed Stepha up the ramp to the lock. Chee Lan came springing to meet them. "What a darling pet," the girl exclaimed.

Chee bristled. In some respects she was not unlike Master Beljagor. "You try to kitchy-koo me, young lady, and you'll be lucky to get your fingers back." She swung on her fellows. "What in the name of nine times nine to the ninety-ninth devils is going on?"

"Didn't you watch the fight?" Falkayn said. Under Stepha's eyes, he preened himself. "I thought we did a rather good job on those bandits."

"What bandits?" Chee snapped. "From here I could see them go right into town. If you ask me—if you have the wit to ask me, you pair of vacuum-headed louts—you've clobbered a squad of Imperial soldiers—the same Emperor's that we came here to deal with!"

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They hied themselves to the saloon. Going into town might lead to being shot at. Let Gujgengi come and ask for an explanation. Besides, they had a lot of mutual explaining to get out of the way first.

Falkayn poured Scotch for himself and Stepha. Adzel took a four-liter bucket of coffee. His Buddhistic principles did not preclude drinking, but no ship on an extended mission could carry enough liquor to do him much good. Chee Lan, who was not affected by alcohol, kindled a mildly narcotic cigarette in an interminable ivory holder. They were all in bad need of soothing.

The girl squinted and scowled simultaneously at her glass—she wasn't used to Earth illumination—raised it to her lips, and tossed it off. "Whoo-oo-oo!" she spluttered. Falkayn pounded her back. Between coughs and wheezes, her oaths made him blush. "I thought you were being niggard," she said weakly.

"I suppose you would have lost most of your technology in three generations, at that," Adzel said. "Five hundred people, children included, have insufficient knowledge between them to maintain a modern civilization, and a colony ship would not have carried a full microlibrary."

Stepha wiped her eyes and looked at him. "I always thought Great Granther was an awful liar," she said. "But reckon he must really have seen some things as a youngling. Where are you from?"

He was certainly an impressive sight. Counting the tail, his quadrupedal body was a good four and a half meters long, and the torso had arms, chest, and shoulders to match. Blue-gray scales shimmered overall, save where scutes protected the belly and plates the back; those were umber. The crocodilian head sat on a meter of neck, with bony ears and shelves over the eyes. But those eyes were large, brown, and wistful, and the skull bulged backward to hold a considerable brain.

"Earth," he said. "That is, Zatlakh, which means 'earth' in my language. Humans dubbed it Woden. That was before they ran out of Terrestrial names for planets. Nowadays, for the most part, one uses whatever term is found in the language of what seems the most advanced local culture: as, for instance, 'Ikrananka' here."

"Wouldn't *you* be good in combat?" Stepha mused. One hand dropped to her dagger.

Adzel winced. "Please. We are most peaceful. We are only so large and armored because Woden breeds giant animals. The sun is type F5, you see, in the Regulus sector. It puts out so much energy that, in spite of surface gravity equal to two and a half times Earth's, life can grow massive and—"

"Shut your gas jet, you blithering barbarian," Chee Lan cut in. "We've work on hand."

Adzel came near losing his temper. "My friend," he growled, "it is most discourteous to denigrate other cultures. Granted that my own people are simple hunters, nevertheless we would dare set our arts against anyone's. And when I got a scholarship to study planetology on Earth, I earned extra money by singing Fafnir in the San Francisco Opera."

"Also by parading at Chinese New Year's," said Chee poisonously.

Falkayn struck the table with his fist. "That'll do for both of you," he rapped.

"But where in truth is the, ah, lady from?" Stepha asked.

"The second planet of O2 Eridani A," Falkayn said. "Cynthia, its human discoverers named it, after the captains wife."

"I have heard that she was not exactly his wife," Chee murmured.

Falkayn blushed again and stole a glance at Stepha. But she didn't look embarrassed; and considering those cusswords she'd ripped out—"They'd reached about an Alexandrine level of technology on one continent, at the time," he said, "and had invented the scientific method. But they didn't have cities. A nation was equal to a trade route. So they've fitted very well into League activities." He realized that now he was blithering, and stopped short.

Chee tapped the ash from her cigarette with one delicate six-digited hand. She herself was a mere ninety centimeters tall when she stood fully erect. Mostly she crouched on muscular legs and equally long arms, her magnificent brush curled over the back. Her head was big in proportion, round, with a short black-nosed muzzle, neat little ears, and cat whiskers. Save for a dark mask around the huge luminous-golden eyes, she was entirely covered by white Angora fur. Her thin voice turned brisk: "Let us begin by reviewing your situation, Freelady Carls. No, pardon me, Lieutenant Carls, isn't it? I assume your ancestors were marooned in this general area."

"Yes," Stepha nodded. She picked her words with renewed care. "They soon made touch with the natives, sometimes violent, sometimes not. The violence taught them humans have more strength and endurance than Ikranankans. And here is always war. Better, easier, to be the best soldiers than sweat in fields and mines, not so? Ever since, every Ershokh has grown into the—body?—the corps. Those who can't fight are quartermasters and such." Falkayn observed a scar on her arm. *Poor kid,* he thought in pity. *This is all wrong. She should be dancing and flirting on Earth, with me, for instance. A girl is too sweet and gentle a creature in her heart to—*

Stepha's eyes glittered. "I heard old people tell of wars in Beyond-the-World," she said eagerly. "Could we hire out?"

"What? Well—er—"

"I'm good. You should have seen me at the Battle of the Yanjeh. Ha! They charged our line. One zandara spitted itself on my pike, ran right up." Stepha jumped to her feet, drew her saber and whizzed it through the air. "I took the rider's head off with one sweep. It bounced. I turned and split the fellow beside him from gullet to guts. A dismounted trooper attacked on my left. I gave him my shield boss, crunch, right in the beak. Then—"

"Please!" roared Adzel, and covered his ears.

"We do have to find out the situation," Falkayn added hastily. "Are you or are you not an enemy of the Emperor in Katandara?"

Stepha checked her vehemence, sat down again, and held out her glass for a refill. Once more she was speaking with great caution. "The Ershoka hired out to the first Jadhadi, when the old Empire fell apart. They helped set him on the Beast in Katandara, and rebuild the Empire and expand it, and since then they've been the household troops of each Emperor and the core of his army. Of late, some of them were the capturers of Rangakora, in Sundhadarta to the east on the edge of the Twilight. And that's a most important place to hold. Not alone does it command the chief pass through the mountains, but the water thereabouts makes that country the richest in the Chakora."

"To chaos with your pus-bleeding geopolitics!" Chee interrupted. "Why were you being chased by Imperial soldiers?"

"Um-m-m...I am not sure." Stepha sipped for a moments silence. "Best might be if you tell me of yourselves first. Then maybe between us we can find why the third Jadhadi has you off here instead of in Katandara. Or do you know?"

Adzel shook his ponderous head. "We do not," he answered. "Indeed, we were unaware of being quarantined. We did have intimations. It seemed curious that we have not yet been invited to the capital, and that so few came to visit us even among local dwellers. When we took the flitter out for a spin, we observed military encampments at some distance. Then Gujgengi requested that we refrain from flying. He said the unfamiliar sight produced too much consternation. I hesitate to accuse anyone of prevaricating, but the reason did seem rather tenuous."

"You are truth-told walled away, by Imperial order," Stepha said grimly. "Haijakata has been forbidden to any outsiders, and no one may leave these parts. It hurts trade, but—" Falkayn was about to ask why she had violated the ban, when she continued: "Tell me, though—How come you to be here, in this piddling little corner of nowhere? Why did you come to Ikrananka at all?"

"She's stalling," Chee hissed to Falkayn in League Latin.

"I know," he answered likewise. "But can you blame her? Here we are, total strangers, and the last contact her people had with galactic civilization was that piracy. We've got to be kind, show her we really mean well."

Chee threw up her hands. "Oh, cosmos!" she groaned. "You and your damned mating instinct!"

Falkayn turned his back on her. "Pardon us," he said in Anglic. "We, uh, had something personal to discuss."

Stepha smiled, patted his hand, and leaned quite close to breathe, "I do understand, David...So pretty a name, David. And you from Beyond-the-World! I'm strangling to hear everything about you."

"Well, uh, that is," stuttered Falkayn, "we're trade pioneers. Something new." He hoped his grin was modest rather than silly. "I, er, helped work out the idea myself." With due regard for preserving the basic secret, he explained.

Nicholas van Rijn left his desk and waddled across to the transparency that made one entire wall of his office. From this height, he could overlook a sweep of slim city towers, green parkscape, Sunda Straits flashing under Earth's lordly sky. For a while he stood puffing his cigar, until, without turning around, he said:

"Ja, by damn, I think you has here the bacteria of a good project with much profit. And you is a right man to carry it away. I have watched you like a hog, ever since I hear what you did on Ivanhoe when you was a, you pardon the expression, teen-ager. Now you got your Master's certificate in the League, uh-huh, you can be good working for the Solar Spice & Liquors Company. And I need good men, poor old fat lonely me. You bring home the bacon and eggs scrambled with turmeric, I see you get rich."

"Yes, sir," Falkayn mumbled.

"You come speak of how you like to help open new places, for new stuffs to sell here and natives to buy from us what have not yet heard what the market prices are. Hokay. Only I think you got more possibilities, boy. I been thinking a lot, me, these long, long nights when I toss and turn, getting no sleep with my worries."

Falkayn refrained from telling van Rijn that everybody knew the cause of the merchant's current insomnia was blond and curvy. "What do you mean, sir?" he asked.

Van Rijn faced about, tugged his goatee, and studied him out of beady eyes set close to the great hook nose. "I tell you confidential," he said at length. "You not violate my confidence, ha? I got so few friends. You break my old gray heart and I personal wring your neck. Understand? Fine, fine. I like a boy what has got good understandings.

"My notion is, here the League finds new planets, and everybody jumps in with both feets and is one cutthroat scramble. You thought you might go in at this. But no, no, you is too fine, too sensitive. I can see that. Also, you is not yet one of the famous space captains, and nobody spies to see where you is bound next. So…for Solar Spice & Liquors, you go find us our private planets!" He advanced and dug a thumb into Falkayn's ribs. The younger man staggered. "How you like that, ha?"

"But—but—that is—"

Van Rijn tapped two liters of beer from his cooler, clinked glasses, and explained.

The galaxy, even this tiny fragment of one spiral arm which we have somewhat explored, is inconceivably huge. In the course of visiting and perhaps colonizing worlds of obvious interest to them, space travelers have leapfrogged past literally millions of others. Many are not even catalogued. Without a special effort, they are unlikely to become known for millennia. Yet from statistics we can predict that thousands of them are potentially valuable, as markets and sources of new exotic goods. Rather than continue to exploit the discovered planets, why not find new ones…and keep the fact quiet as long as possible?

A sector would be chosen, out where the traffic is still thin: Spica, for instance. A base would be established. Small, cheap automated craft would be dispatched by the hundreds. Whenever they found a world that, from their standardized observations of surface conditions, seemed promising, they would report back. The trade pioneer crew would go for a closer look. If they struck pay dirt, they would collect basic information, lay the groundwork for commercial agreements, and notify van Rijn.

“Three in a ship, I think, is enough,” he said. “Better be enough, what wages and commissions your pest-be-damned Brotherhood charges! You, the Master merchant, trained in culture comparisons and swogglehorning. A planetologist and a xenobiologist. They should be nonhumans. Different talents, you see, also not so much nerve-scratching when cooped together. Nicer to have a lovingly girl along, I know, but when you get back again, ha, ha!—you make up good. Or even before. You got just invited to my next little orgy, boy, if you take the job.”

“So you knew there was a civilization here with metal,” Stepha nodded. “Of course your robots—jeroo, to think I never believed Great Granther when he talked about robots!—they didn’t see us few Ershoka. But what did they tell you was worth coming here for?”

“An Earthlike planet is always worth investigating,” Falkayn said.

“What? This is like Earth? Great Granther—”

“Any planet where men can live without special apparatus is Earthlike. They’re not too common, you see. The physical conditions, the biochemistry, the ecology…never mind. Ikrananka has plenty of differences from Earth or Hermes, true.”

Mass, 0.394 Terrestrial, density 0.815, diameter 0.783. But though its sun is feeble, it orbits close. To be sure, then tidal action has forced one hemisphere constantly to face the primary. But this slow rotation in turn means a weak magnetic field, hence comparatively little interaction with stellar charged particles, which are not emitted very strongly from a red dwarf anyway. Thus it keeps a reasonable atmosphere. Granted, most of the water has been carried to the cold side and frozen, making the warm side largely desert. But this took time, during which life based on proteins *in water solution could evolve and adapt. Indeed, the chemistry remains startlingly like home.*

“What is there to get here?”

“Lots. The robots brought back pictures and samples. At least two new intoxicants, several antibiotics, potential spices, some spectacular furs, and doubtless much else. Also a well-developed civilization to gather the stuff for us, in exchange for trade goods that they’re far enough advanced to appreciate.”

Chee smacked her lips. “The commissions to be gotten!”

Stepha sighed. “I wish you’d speak Anglic. But I’ll take your word for true. Why did you land at Haijakata? You must have known Katandara is the biggest city.”

“It’s complicated enough being a visitor from space, without getting swarmed over from the start,” Falkayn replied. “We’ve been learning the local language, customs, the whole setup, in this backwater. It goes pretty quick, with modern mnemonic techniques. And the Emperor sent Gujgengi as a special teacher, once he heard of us. We were going to the capital before now; but as soon as we announced that, the professor started finding excuses for delay. That was three or four weeks back.”

“I wonder how much we really have learned,” Chee muttered.

“What are weeks?” Stepha asked.

“Forget it,” Chee said. “See here, female, you have involved us in trouble that may cost us our whole market.”

“What a stupid!” the girl barked impatiently. “Conquer them.”

“A highly immoral procedure,” Adzel scolded. “Also it is against policy: as much, I confess, because of being economically unfeasible as for any other reason."

"Will you get to the point, you yattertongues?" Chee screamed. "Why were those soldiers after you?"

The alarm bell toned. The computer said, "A party is approaching from the town."

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Falkayn decided he had better be courteous and meet the Imperial envoy-instructor at the air lock. He kept his blaster conspicuously on one hip.

Waiting, he could look up to the walls on the hillcrest. They were of dry-laid stone; water was too precious to use in mortar. Their battlements, and the gaunt towers at their corners, enclosed a few score woven houses. Haijakata was a mere trading center for the local farmers and for caravans passing through. A rather small garrison was maintained. The northern highlands had been cleared of those barbarian raiders who haunted most deserts, Gujgengi admitted, so Falkayn suspected the troops were quartered here mainly as a precaution against revolt. What little he had found out of Ikranankan history sounded turbulent.

Which is still another worry, he fretted. *Old Nick isn't going to invest in expensive facilities unless there's a reasonably stable social order to keep the trade routes open. And the Katandaran Empire looks like the only suitable area on the whole planet. No trading post on Ikrananka, no commissions for me. What a jolly, carefree, swashbuckling life we explorers lead!*

His gaze shifted to the oncoming party. There were a couple of dozen soldiers, in leather breastplates, armed to the teeth they didn't have with swords, knives, crossbows, and big ugly halberds. All wore the curlicue insigne of the Tirut phratry; everyone in the garrison did. At their head stalked Gujgengi. He was tall for an Ikranankan, skinny, his blue-black fur grizzled, a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles perched precariously on his beak. A scarlet robe swept to his feet, emblazoned with the crest of the Deodakh, the Imperial, phratry. At his tasseled belt hung a long snickersnee. Falkayn had not yet seen any native male without a weapon.

The human made the knee bend with arms crossed on breast that did duty here for a salaam. "To the most noble Gujgengi and his relatives, greeting," he intoned ritually. He'd never be able to pronounce this guttural language right. His speaking apparatus was not designed for it. And his grammar was still ramshackle. But by now he was reasonably fluent.

Gujgengi did not use the formula, "Peace between our kindred," but rather, "Let us talk," which implied there was a serious matter on hand that he *hoped* could be settled without bloodshed. And he made signs against evil, which he hadn't done of late.

"Honor my house," Falkayn invited, since the native tongue had no word for ship and "wagon" was ridiculous.

Gujgengi left his followers posted and stiffly climbed the ramp. "I do wish you would put in decent lighting," he complained. Since he saw no wavelength shorter than yellow, though his visual spectrum included the near infrared, the fluoros were dim to him; his horizontal-pupiled eyes had little dark adaptation, which was scarcely needed on the sunward hemisphere.

Falkayn guided him to the saloon. Gujgengi grumbled the whole way. This place was too hot, one might as well be in Subsolar country, and it stank and the air was wet and would Falkayn please quit breathing damp on him. Ikranankans didn’t exhale water vapor. What their metabolism produced went straight into the bloodstream.

At the end, he stopped in the doorway, stiffened, and adjusted his glasses. “So you are in truth sheltering her!” he croaked.

Stepha reached for her saber. “Now, now, now,” said Adzel, laying irresistible fingers around her arm. “Is that nice?”

“Be seated, most noble,” said Falkayn. “Have a drink.”

Gujgengi accepted some Scotch with ill-concealed eagerness. Ikranankans were quite humanlike in that respect. “I was given to understand you came in friendship,” he said. “I trust this occurrence can be satisfactorily explained.”

“Why, sure,” Falkayn said, more heartily than lie felt. “We saw this female of my race being chased by strangers who, as far as we could tell, were raiders. Naturally we supposed she was from our homeland.”

Chee blew a smoke ring and added in her silkiest voice, “The more so when you, most noble, had never seen fit to tell us there was an old human settlement here.”

“Ak-krrr,” Gujgengi hemmed. “With so much else to teach you—”

“But surely you knew how interesting this one thing would be,” Chee pursued.

“—at your own request—”

“Really, most noble, we are shocked and grieved.”

“They merely form another phratry of soldiers—”

“Of considerable importance to the Empire, with which we were negotiating in good faith.”

“She broke the Emperor’s express command—”

"What command? That we be isolated? Now that, most noble, is another deplorable discovery. We begin to wonder how much faith has been kept with us. Perhaps we are not welcome here? We can withdraw, you know. We have no wish to force ourselves or our trade goods on anyone."

"No, no, no!" Gujgengi had inspected samples of everything from synthetic fabrics to chemical firearms. He breathed harder each time he thought about them. "It *was* only—"

"Though to be frank," Chee said, "the withdrawal cannot be permanent. Our people at home must be told about these Ershoka, and come arrange for their transportation to a more suitable clime. The overlords of Earth will not be pleased to learn that Katandara was keeping these unfortunates in concealment. Were they, perhaps, being mistreated? I am afraid that a very grave view will be taken of this affair."

Falkayn was too rocked back to enjoy the spectacle of Gujgengi's rout. He hadn't thought of the implications. Returning the Ershoka home—why, that'd blow the gaff clear to Andromeda! And he was supposed to keep his discoveries quiet!

Maybe—No. He looked at Stepha, seated proud and cat-lithe on the edge of her chair, the light glowing in her tresses and gray eyes, down the white curves of her, and knew he couldn't betray her with his silence. Anyhow, it would be useless. Once traders started coming here, they'd also learn the facts, and some conscientious bastard was certain to blab.

Gujgengi lifted his tumbler in a hand gone shaky, tilted his head back, and poured deftly into his open bill. "I ought to confer with the Emperor," he said. "I really ought to. But…under the circumstances…perhaps we can reach an understanding."

"I do hope so," said Adzel.

"The fact is," Gujgengi confessed, "shortly before you came, a—ak-krrr—a most unhappy situation arose. The Empire has been in the process of conquering Sundhadarta." No mealymouthed phrases about "pacification" in this language. "The key to that whole region is Rangakora city. Being strongly fortified, it was hard to take, so the Emperor dispatched a contingent of his own crack troops, the Ershoka, to help the storming, under High Guardsman—uk-k-k—"

"Bobert Thorn," said Stepha curtly, supplying the labials.

"They succeeded—"

"You might thank her," said Chee.

Gujgengi looked confused and needed another drink. "They succeeded," he managed to continue. "But then, uk, Ohertorn decided this could be the nucleus of a kingdom for himself. He and his men...well, they threw out our troops and took possession. There they have been ever since. We have, uk, not yet gotten them dislodged. Meanwhile the Ershoka still in the capital grow restless. And then you, of the same race, conceivably of the same phratry, appear! Do you wonder that the Emperor wished to, ak-krrr, proceed with, shall we say, circumspection?"

"Judas on a crutch!" said Falkayn indistinctly.

Stepha sat for a moment in a silence deepened by the rustle of air in ventilators, the impatient tap of Chee's cigarette holder on the table, and Gujgengi's asthmatic breathing. She scowled at the deck and tugged her chin, abruptly she reached a decision, straightened, and said:

"Yes, truth, this has hurt the Ershoka in Katandara. They know they're under suspicion. Let the Emperor get too bloody suspicious, and he may even try to have 'em massacred. I don't think that'd be so wise of him—any bets who'd come out of the fracas alive?-—but we don't want to rip the Empire apart. At the same time, we've got to look out for our own. So we heard rumors about these new-come strangers. Bound to happen, you know. Haijakatans would've carried the news around before the ban was laid on. Now and then, a planter may still sneak past the guard posts. We had to find out, in the Iron House, what these yarns meant. Else we'd be like blind men on a cliff trail. I reckoned to reach this place. My own idea, I true-speak you. None else knew. But a patrol eyeballed me."

Gujgengi did not seize on the obvious opportunity to bluster about loyalty and subordination. Or maybe there was no such chance. More and more during the weeks, Falkayn had gotten the impression that Ikranankans were loyal to their own blood kindred and anything else was a mere bond of convenience.

But wait!

Excited, he sprang up. Gujgengi reached for his sword, but the man only paced, back and forth, feet jarring on the deck, as he rattled out:

"Hey, this whole thing is a turn of magic for us." No word for good luck. "Your Emperor was wrong to suspect us. We're traders. Our interest lies in a secure realm that we can deal with. The weapons on this ship can blow down any wall ever built. We'll take Rangakora for him."

"No!" Stepha shouted. She boiled to her own feet, saber gleaming forth. "You filthy—"

Falkayn let her run down, in Adzel's grasp, before he asked, "Why, what's wrong? Aren't you on the Imperial side?"

"Before I let you kill a thousand Ershoka," she said between her teeth, "I'll—"and she was off again, in quite a long and anatomical catalogue of what she would do to David Falkayn.

"Oh, but honey chil'," he protested. "You don't understand. I'm not going to kill anybody. Just knock down a wall or two, and overawe the garrison."

"Then Jadhadi's soldiers will take care of them," she said bleakly.

"Uh-uh. We'll protect them. Make some arrangement."

"See here," Gujgengi objected, "the Emperor's prerogatives—"

Falkayn told him where the Emperor could store his prerogatives, but in Latin. In Katandaran he said, "An amnesty is our price for helping. With safeguards. I don't think it's too high. But that's for the Emperor to decide. We'll fly to him and discuss the matter."

"Now, wait!" Gujgengi cried. "You cannot—"

"Precisely how do you plan to stop us, sonny boy?" Chee leered.

Gujgengi fell back on argument. The Emperor would be displeased if his orders were flouted. There was no suitable place in Katandara for landing the ship. The populace was so uneasy that the sight could provoke a riot. Et cetera, et cetera.

"Best we compromise," Adzel whispered. "Arrogance breeds resistance."

After considerable haggling, Gujgengi agreed that, under the circumstances, the flitter might go. It was small, could dart in before many people saw it and sit unseen in the palace gardens. And indeed a message to Katandara by land would take an awkwardly long time.

"As well, at that, to keep the ship here," Chee remarked. "A reserve, in case you have trouble."

In case *we* do?" Adzel pounced.

"You don't think I intend to go live in that dust pot of an atmosphere, do you? Not if I can help it. And I can play my tapes in peace while you and your cast-iron ear are gone."

"If you intend to play what, for lack of a suitably malodorous word, is called Cynthian music, then I will most certainly not be here."

"We'll take you home with us," Falkayn offered Stepha.

She had held oddly aloof, watching with the mask back in place. Now she hesitated. "You won't get into trouble, will you?" he asked.

"N-n-no," she said in Anglic, which Gujgengi didn't speak. "My barrack mates will have covered my disappearance, even if they didn't know the reason for it. Not hard to do, when these stupid Ikranankans think all Ershoka look alike. But we must be—I mean, we're confined to the city for the time being. I can't walk right in the gates, and if I arrived openly with you, I'd be watched." She pondered. "You land quick, right in front of the Iron House, and I can dash in. If they ask you why, afterward, tell them you mistook it for the palace."

"Why do you care if you're watched?"

"I don't like the idea." She grasped his hands and leaned close. "Please, David. You've been so good a friend till now."

"Well—"

She waggled her eyelashes. "I hope we can become still better friends."

"All right, dammit!"

Arrangements were quickly made. Falkayn changed into a warm tunic, trousers, and boots, with a white cloak and a bejeweled cap tilted rakishly across his brow to add class. Two guns snugged at his waist, blaster and stunner. Into a breast pocket he slipped a transceiver; the planet had sufficient ionosphere for radio to reach between here and Katandara. He stuffed a bag with extra gear and gifts for the Emperor. Adzel took no more than a communicator hung about his neck.

"We'll call in regularly, Chee," Falkayn said. "If you don't hear from either of us for eight hours straight, haul gravs and come a-running."

"I still don't know why you bother," the Cynthian grumbled. "That wretched female has already spoiled this whole mission."

"The secrecy angle? We may solve that somehow. At worst, even with competitors swarming in, Old Nick will get some good out of a stable Empire. And, uh, in any event we can't let bloodshed go on."

"Why not?" She gave up. "Very well, be off. I'll continue our sessions with Gujgengi. The more information we have, the better."

The Imperial agent had already gone back to town with his escort. But Haijakata's parapets were dark with natives clustered to see the takeoff.

"Oh-h-h!" Stepha gasped and clutched Falkayn's arm. He resisted the temptation to do some aerial acrobatics and lined off for Katandara, a little north of west. The preliminary survey had made excellent maps, and Gujgengi had identified points of interest on them.

Kilometer after kilometer, the Chakora fled beneath them. They rode in a humming bubble over endless red-green fields, tiny thorps, once a strung-out caravan of laden four-footed karikuts guarded by warriors on zandara-back. "Those must be Shekhej," Stepha remarked. "Their phratry does most of the hauling in these parts."

Adzel, squeezing the trio together by his bulk (not that Falkayn minded), asked, "Is every trade a family affair?"

"Why, yes," Stepha said. "You're born a Shekhej, you're a caravaneer. All Deodaka used to be hunters till they conquered Katandara; now they're officials. The Tiruts and others, like we Ershoka, are soldiers. The Rahinjis are scribes. And so it goes."

"But suppose one is born with the wrong sort of talent?"

“Oh, each phratry has lots of different things to do. The main job is the most honorable one. But somebody has to keep house, keep accounts, keep farms if the group owns any—everything. You’d not trust that to outsiders, would you?

“Also, a youth at the age when he’s to begin learning the phratry secrets, he can be adopted into a different one if he wants and if it’ll take him. That’s one reason we Ershoka are so apart. We couldn’t marry with any Ikranankans”—Stepha giggled and made a vulgar joke—“so we have to stay in the corps. On t’ other hand, for that same reason, we know we can trust our young. They’ve no place else to go. So we initiate them early.”

“I understand most phratries are very ancient.”

“Yes. Kingdoms come and go, none last more’n a few generations, but a bloodline is forever.”

Her words confirmed what Falkayn had already gathered. It bespoke an ingrained clannishness that worried him. If the attitude was instinctive, this was a poor world in which to set up operations. But if it could be altered—if the Ikranankans could be made to feel loyalty toward something larger than a cluster of families—

Katandara hove into view. The city lay no more than two hundred kilometers from Haijakata, which in turn was halfway to Rangakora. The Empires great extent was west and south, through the fertile Chakora.

Winding from the northeast came the Yanjeh River, a silver gleam surrounded by a belt of vegetation that glowed against stark eastern hills and tawny western ranchlands. Where it ran down the former continental shelf and emptied into broad, muddy Lake Urshi, Katandara was built. That was an impressive city, which must house half a million. Whole civilizations had possessed it, one after the other, as Rome and Constantinople, Peking and Mexico City, had been possessed: each adding to walls and towers and buildings, until now the ramparts enclosed a sprawl built almost entirely in stone. Old were those stones, the hewn outlines crumbling, and old were the narrow streets that twisted between facades gray, square, and secretive. Only at the landward end, where the ground rose steeply, was there anything not scoured by millennia of desert sand—the works of the newest rulers, marble-veneered and dome-topped, roofed with copper and decorated with abstract mosaics. That section, like those of earlier overlords, had a wall of its own, to protect masters from people.

With a magnifying scanner, Stepha could point out details at such a distance that the flitter was yet unseen. Falkayn went into a dive. Air shrieked. The controls thrummed beneath his hands. At the last instant, he threw in reverse grav and came to a bone-jarring halt.

“Farewell, David...till we meet again.” Stepha leaned over and brushed her lips across his. Blood beat high in her face. He caught the sweet wild odor of her hair. Then she was out the lock.

The Ershoka were barracked in a single great building near the palace. It fronted on a cobbled square, along with the homes of the wealthy. Like them, it was built around a courtyard and turned a blank entry to the world. But some memory of Earth lingered in peaked iron roof, gable ends carved into monster heads, even the iron doors. A few Ikranankans gaped stupefied at the flitter. So did the sentries at the barrack entrance, big bearded men in chain mail, helmets gilt and plumed, cloaks that the wind flung about in rainbow stripes. But at once their weapons snapped up and they shouted.

Stepha sped toward them. Falkayn took off. He had a last glimpse of her being hustled inside.

“Now ho for Ol’ Massa’s,” he said. “Let’s hope he asks questions first and shoots later.”

-4-

A gong rang outside the guest apartment. “Come in,” said Falkayn. A servant in close-fitting livery parted the thick drapes which served for interior doors in this wood-poor country. He saluted and announced that the Emperor wished audience with the delegates of the ’Olesotechnic’gir. His manner was polite but unservile, and he used no special titles for the ruler, like His Majesty or His Potency or His Most Awe-inspiring Refulgence. The system of hereditary jobs did not amount to a caste hierarchy; backed by his kin, a janitor was as proudly independent as a soldier or scribe.

“My associate has gone out,” Falkayn said, “but I suppose I’ll do.”

Do what? he wondered to himself. *We’ve been cooling our motors for a week by my watch. Maybe one of those couriers that keep scurrying back and forth has put a fire-cracker in Jadhadi’s pants, at last. Or maybe this time I can, when he isn’t looking. Sure wish so. All right, I’ll do, and I’ll do, and, I’ll do.*

He went to get a suitably fancy tunic for the occasion. The rooms lent him were spacious, except for low ceilings, and luxurious in their fashion. Too bad the fashion wasn’t his. He liked hangings of gorgeous orange fur, especially when he estimated what such pelts would fetch on Earth. But the murals were not only in an alien artistic idiom; half the colors registered on him as mere black. The bare floor was always cold. And he couldn’t fit himself comfortably onto the gaunt settees or into a shut-bed designed for an Ikranankan.

The third-story balcony gave him a view of the palace gardens. They suggested an Old Japanese layout: rocks, low subtly hued plants, the extravagance of a fountain—which played inside a glass column, to control evaporation. Little but roofs were visible above the estate walls. To the west, the sun shone dull and angry crimson through a dust veil. Another storm, Falkayn thought; more trouble for the ranchers out yonder.

A week inside an imperial palace could have been interesting, if the Imperium had been human and reasonably decadent. Katandara was neither. In sheer despair, he had been improving his language by reading what was billed as the greatest epic in the world. It had more begats than the Bible. He made a face at the codex and thumbed his transceiver. “Hullo, Adzel,” he said in Latin, “how’re you doing?”

“We are about to enter what I assume is a tavern,” the Wodenite’s voice replied. “At least, the legend says this is The House of Exquisite Pleasures and Ferocious Booze.”

“Oh, Lord, and I have to mind the store. Listen, the big red wheel has summoned me. Probably just for more quizzing and more postponement of any decision, but you never know. So maintain radio silence, huh?” As far as the galactics could tell, the Ikranankans were ignorant of this means of communication. It was as well to keep some aces in the hole.

Unless the Ershoka had told—No, that seemed unlikely. Set down with nothing more than clothes and a few hand tools, caught up almost at once in this tumultuous culture, their ancestors had rapidly forgotten the arts of home. Why build guns or anything else that would prove an equalizer, even if you found time and skill to do so, when you lived by being twice as tough as the locals? Except for a few gadgets useful in everyday life, the humans had introduced nothing, and their knowledge dwindled away into fable.

"Very well," Adzel said. "I will assure Captain Padrick it is harmless magic. I have to calm him anyway. Good luck."

Falkayn returned to the main room and followed the servant down long corridors and sweeping ramps. A hum of activity surrounded him, footfalls, voices, rustling robes and papers. Ikranankans passed: gowned officials, hooded merchants, uniformed flunkies, planters in kilts, ranchers in chaps and spurred boots, visitors from afar, even a trader from the warm lands of Subsolar, shivering in a hairy cloak—the ebb and flow of life through this crown on the queen city. Cooking odors reminded Falkayn he was hungry. He had to admit regional cuisine was excellent, auguring well for van Rijn. If.

At the entrance to the throne room, four Ershoka stood guard, as gaudily outfitted as the men before the Iron House. They weren't at attention. That hadn't been invented here, and the humans had been smart enough not to suggest the idea. But they and their gleaming halberds scarcely moved. Flanking them were a dozen Tirut archers. Falkayn felt pretty sure those had been added since the troubles began in Rangakora. You couldn't blame Jadhadi for a soured attitude, when he could no longer trust his own *Sicherheitsdienst*.

Still, there was something downright paranoid about his wariness. Instead of jumping at Falkayn's offer to recover the stolen town, he'd interrogated for a week. Since he had nothing to lose by accepting, or at least hadn't given any such reasons, it must be due to exaggerated xenophobia. But what caused that, and what could be done about it?

Falkayn's attendant switched the drapes aside, and he passed through.

Jadhadi III waited on the Beast, a chimera in gilt bronze whose saddle he bestrode. Falkayn stopped at the required distance of seven paces (which, he suspected, gave the Ershoka by the throne time to intervene if he should make an assassin's lunge) and saluted. "Where is your companion?" asked the Emperor sharply. He was middle-aged, his fur still sleekly red-black, his beginning paunch hidden under a scarlet robe. One hand clutched a jeweled scepter which was also a businesslike spear.

"An officer of the household troops invited us on a tour of your city, most noble," Falkayn explained. "Not wishing to be both absent—"

"What officer?" Jadhadi leaned forward. The nearest of his Ershoka, a woman who would have made a better Valkyrie were she not battle-scarred, gray-haired, and built like a brick wash tub, dropped hand to sword. The others in attendance, scribes, advisers, magicians, younger sons learning the business of government, edged closer. Their eyes glowed in the murky light.

"Why…Hugh Padrick, his name was, most noble."

"Ak-krrr. Will they be back soon?"

"I don't know, most noble. Is there any haste?"

"No. Perhaps not. Yet I mislike it." Jadhadi turned to a native guards officer. "Have them found and returned." To a scribe: "Post a notice that all Ershoka are forbidden contact with the delegates of the 'Olesotechnic'gir."

"Most noble!" The one other human not on sentry-go in the room—its length, between the polished malachite columns, was filled with alternate Ershoka and Otnakaji—stepped out from the courtiers. He was an old man, with beard and shoulder-length hair nearly white, but erect in his tunic. Falkayn had met him at other audiences: Harry Smit, senior of the phratry and its spokesman before the Emperor. "I protest."

The chamber grew suddenly very still. Shadows wove beneath the silver chandeliers, whose luminance shimmered on marble and fur and rich dark fabrics. Bitter incense smoked snakishly from braziers. The harpists at the far end of the chamber stopped their plangent chords, the ornate clock behind them seemed to tick louder.

Jadhadi stiffened in his saddle. The diamond eyes of the Beast glittered as hard as his own. “What say you?” the Emperor rasped.

Smit stood soldierly in front of him and answered: “Most noble, we Ershoka of your household also rage at Bobert Thorn’s insubordination. He is no longer one of us, nor will we receive his followers among us again.” (The woman guard acquired a look at those words, even more harsh than the situation warranted.) “Only let us march to Rangakora, and we will show you that the house of Ershokh stands by the house of Deodakh no less now than in the years of the first Jadhadi. But you trust us not. You keep us idle, you spy on our every step, you assign other phratries to join us in the duties that were ours since this palace was raised. This we have borne in patience, knowing you cannot be sure how strong the call of blood may be. Nonetheless, we chafe. They grumble in the Iron House. Insult them so openly, and I may not be able to restrain them.”

For a moment glances clashed. Then Jadhadi looked away, toward his chief magician. “What say you, Nagagir?” he asked sullenly.

That stooped Ikranankan in the habit emblemed with devices of power refrained from saying the obvious—that this room held fifty Ershoka who wouldn’t stand for any rough treatment of their phratry chief. Instead, he croaked shrewdly. “The matter seems slight, most noble. Very few guards will find their way to your distinguished guests. If they feel so strongly about it, what difference?”

“I was speaking in your own best interests,” Harry Smit added in a mild voice.

Falkayn thought he saw an opening. If we don't linger here, most noble, the issue hardly arises, does it?" he said. "Take my offer, and we'll be off to Rangakora; refuse, and we'll go home. What about a decision?"

"Krrr-ek." The Emperor gave in. "Cancel those orders," he said. To Falkayn: "I cannot decide blindly. We know so little about you. Even with friendly intentions, you could somehow bring bad luck. That was what I summoned you for today. Explain your rites to Nagagir, that he can evaluate them."

Oh no! Falkayn groaned to himself.

However, he found the session interesting. He'd wondered before about what seemed a total absence of religion but hadn't gotten around to querying Gujgengi. While he couldn't ask Nagagir to explain things point by point—might be as dangerous to reveal ignorance as to keep it—he gathered a certain amount of information indirectly. By claiming, sometimes falsely, not to understand various questions, he drew the magician out on the key items.

Only a moron or a tourist would generalize about an entire planet from a single culture. But you could usually figure that the most advanced people on a world had at least one of the more sophisticated theologies. And Katandara's was astoundingly crude. Falkayn wasn't sure whether to call that mishmash a religion or not. There weren't any gods: merely a normal order of things, an expected course of events, which had obtained ever since primordial Fire and Ice happened to get together and condense into the universe. But there were vaguely personified demons, powers, call them what you will; and they were forever trying to restore chaos. Their modus operandi was to cause disasters. They could only be held at bay through magic, ranging from a hundred everyday observances and taboos to the elaborate arcana which Nagagir and his college practiced.

And magicians weren't uniformly good, either. You never knew if somebody hadn't been corrupted and was lending his abilities to the service of Destruction.

The mythology sounded as paranoid as the rest of Ikranankan thought. Falkayn began to despair of getting a trade treaty okayed.

"Yes, indeed," he fended, "we of the Polesotechnic League are mighty wizards. We have studied deeply those laws of chance that govern the world. I'll be glad to teach you a most educational rite we call poker. And for keeping off bad luck, why, we can sell you talismans at unbelievably low prices, such as those precious herbs named four-leaved clovers."

Nagagir, though, wanted details. Falkayn's magic could be less effective than the human believed; Destruction sometimes lured people thus to their doom. It could even be black magic; the most noble would understand that this possibility had to be checked.

Not being Martin Schuster, to upset a whole cult by introducing the Kabbalah, Falkayn must needs stall. "I'll prepare an outline, most noble, which we can study together." *Lord help me,* he said to himself. *Or, rather, Chee Lan help me. Not Adzel—a Buddhist convert isn't good for much in this connection except soothing noises—but I've seen Chee tell fortunes at parties. I'll call her and we'll work out something.* "If you would make a similar outline of your own system for me, that would be valuable."

Nagagir's beak dropped open, Jadhadi rose in his golden stirrups, poised his spear, and screeched, "You pry into our secrets?"

"No, no, no!" Falkayn spread his hands and sweated. "Not your classified information—I mean, not anything hidden from the uninitiated of the sorcerer phratries. Just the things that everybody knows, except a foreigner like me."

Nagagir cooled off. “That shall be done,” he said, “albeit the writing will take time.”

“How long?”

Nagagir shrugged. Nobody else was much more helpful. While mechanical clocks had been around for some centuries, and the Ershoka had made improvements, Katandara used these simply to equalize work periods. Born to a world without nights or seasons, the people remained vague about any interval shorter than one of their seventy-two-day years. Matters were worse in the boondocks where *Muddlin' Through* sat. There, the Ikranankans just worked at whatever needed doing till they felt ready to knock off. Doubtless their attitude made for a good digestion. But Falkayn’s innards curdled.

“May I go, most noble?” he asked. Jadhadi said yes, and Falkayn left before he spat in most noble’s eye.

“Have some dinner brought me,” he instructed the servant who guided him back, “and writing materials, and a jug of booze. A large jug.”

“What kind of booze?”

“Ferocious, of course. Scat!” Falkayn dropped the curtain across his door.

An arm closed around his throat. “Guk!” he said, and reached for his guns while he kicked back.

His heel struck a heavy calf-length boot. The mugger’s free hand clamped on his right wrist. Falkayn was strong, but he couldn’t unlimber a weapon with that drag on him, nor the one on his left hip when another brawny Ershokh clung to that arm. He struggled for air. A third human glided into view before him. He lashed out with a foot, hit a shield, and would have yelped in anguish had he been able. The shield pressed him back against the mugger. And behind it was the lace of Stepha Carls. Her right hand pushed a soaked rag over his nostrils. The strangler eased off; reflex filled Falkayn's lungs; an acrid smell hit him like a blow and whirled him toward darkness.

-5-

Ordinarily, Hugh Padrick said, Old City wasn't the safest area in the world. Aside from being the home of phratries specializing in murder, theft, strong-arm robbery—plus less antisocial occupations like gambling and prostitution—it was a skulking place for the remnants of earlier cycles, who resented the Deodakh conquest. Ershoka went down there in groups. However, Adzel counted as a group by himself.

"But I don't want to provoke a conflict," the Wodenite said.

"Hardly reckon you will," Padrick grinned. In undress uniform, tunic, trousers, boots, cloak, sword and knife, he was a big young man. His curly brown hair framed rugged features, where a new-looking beard grew beneath a Roman nose. His conversation had been interesting on the several occasions when he dropped in at the apartment. And Adzel, whose bump of curiosity was in proportion to the rest of him, couldn't resist the guardsman's offer of a conducted tour.

They strolled out the palace gates and across New City. The Wodenite drew stares but caused no sensation. News had gotten around about the Emperor's guests. And the educated class had some knowledge of astronomy.

"Did you humans teach them that?" Adzel asked when Padrick remarked on it.

"A little, I reckon," the Ershokh replied. "Though I'm told they already knew about the planets going around the sun and being worlds, even had a notion the stars are other suns."

"How could they? In this perpetual daylight—"

"From the Rangakorans, I think. That's a city with more arts than most. And close enough to Twilight that their explorers could go clear into the Dark for charting stars."

Adzel nodded. Atmospheric circulation must keep the far side reasonably warm. Even the antipodes of Subsolar would hardly get below minus fifty degrees or so. For the same reason, as well as the planet being smaller and the sun having a larger angular diameter, there was less edge effect here than on Earth. Neither the poles nor the border of Twilight differed radically in climate from the temperate zones.

Natives who ventured into the frozen lands would be handicapped by poor night vision. But after establishing fuel depots, they'd have fire on hand. Probably the original motive for such a base had been mining. Scientific curiosity came later.

"In fact," Padrick murmured, "Rangakora's a lot better town than this. More comfortable and more, uh, civilized. Sometimes I wish our ancestors had met the Rangakorans before they joined with a slew of barbarians invading a busted empire." He clipped his mouth shut and glanced around to make sure he hadn't been overheard.

Beyond the inner wall, the ground fell abruptly. Buildings grew progressively older, weathered gray blocks crowding each other, shut doors marked with the symbols of long-dead civilizations. In market sections, females occupied booths, crying their husbands' wares, food, drink, cloth, pelts, handicrafts. In the workshops behind them, iron rang, potters' wheels whirred, pedal-driven looms whickered. But the shops themselves were locked away from public sight, lest a demon or a wicked magician find ways to cause an accident.

Traffic was brisk, raucous, aggressive in fighting its way through the narrow sand streets. Planters' carts, drawn by spans of karikuts, loaded with Chakoran produce, creaked past near-naked porters with burdens on their shaven heads, but yielded to swaggering Shekheji caravaneers. A flatbed wagon was guarded by none less than several Tiruts, for it carried stalks spliced and glued together to make timber, more costly than bronze. Awkward when they must walk rather than leap, a dozen zandaras bore Lachnakoni come to trade hides for city goods; the desert dwellers gripped their lances tight and peered warily from behind their veils. Noise surfed around, harsh Ikranankan babble, rumblings, groanings, footfalls, clangor, and dust and smoke swirled with a thousand sharp smells.

No one disputed Adzel's right of way. Indeed, quite a few tried to climb straight up the nearest wall. A hundred beaked faces goggled fearfully off the verge of every flat roof. Padrick carried high a staff with the Deodakh flag, and of course *some* word about the strangers had penetrated this far. But the ordinary Katandaran didn't seem very reassured.

"Why is that one in the brown robe making signs at us, from yonder alley?" Adzel asked.

"He's a wizard. Taking your curse off the neighborhood. Or so he hopes." Padrick was hard to hear above the voice-roar that was rising toward a collective shriek.

"But I wouldn't curse anybody!"

"He doesn't know that. Anyhow, they reckon anything new is likely black-magical."

An attitude which evidently prevailed in high society, too, Adzel reflected. That would help account for Jadhadi's reluctance to ally himself with the League envoys. *I must discuss this with David when I get back.*

Padrick spent some time showing points of interest: a statue five thousand Earth-years old, the palace of a former dynasty turned into a warehouse; a building whose doorway was an open beak…museum stuff. Adzel paid more attention to the imposing houses of several great phratries, where the seniors lived and member families held council. Though they took part in the present government, these blood groups had not changed their headquarters to New City. Why should they? Empires, languages, civilizations, the march and countermarch of history, all were ephemeral. Only the phratry endured.

"The House of the Stone Ax," Padrick pointed. "Belongs to the Dattagirs. Their senior still carries that ax. Flint head; nobody knows when it was made, except must've been before metalworking." He yawned. "You getting bored? Let's go where we can find some life. Old City."

"Won't they avoid me there, too?" Adzel asked. He hoped not. It pained him that mothers should snatch their cubs and run when he appeared—such cute, fuzzy little infants, he'd love to hold one for a while.

"Not so much," Padrick said. "Less scared of black magic, seeing as a lot of them are black magicians themselves."

Down they went, past a ruined wall and into the casbah. The houses they found were more tall and narrow than those of later eras, shoulder to shoulder with overhanging balconies so that a bare strip of plum-colored sky showed overhead and shadows were thick purple. Living on a more prosperous time, when the land was not quite as arid, the builders had cobbled their streets. Adzel's hooves rang loud on the stones, for this was a silent quarter, where cloaked dwellers passed on furtive errands and only the keening of a hidden harp resounded. Along the way, that toppled toward the sea bed, Adzel could look back to the red-tinged cliffs above the whole city; and down, to the remnants of wharves among the reeds where Lake Urshi glimmered. Padrick stopped. "What say you of a drink?"

"Well, I like your brew—" Adzel broke off. The transceiver at his neck had come alive with Falkayn's voice.

"What the demons!" Padrick sprang back. His sword hissed from the scabbard. A pair of Ikranankans, squatting before a doorway across the lane, gathered their ragged capes around them and vanished inside.

Adzel waved a soothing hand and finished his Latin conversation with Falkayn. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "A bit of our own magic, quite safe. A, ah, a spell against trouble, before entering a strange house."

"That could be useful, I grant." Padrick relaxed. "'Specially hereabouts."

"Why do you come if you find danger?"

"Booze, gambling, maybe a fight. Gets dull in barracks. C'mon."

"I, ah, believe I had better return to the palace."

"What? When the fun's only beginning?" Padrick tugged Adzel's arm, though he might as well have tried to haul a mountain.

"Another time, perhaps. The magic advised me—"

Padrick donned a hurt expression. "You're no friend of mine if you won't drink my liquor."

"Forgive me," Adzel capitulated. "After your great kindness, I would not be discourteous." And he was thirsty; and Falkayn hadn't intimated there was any hurry.

Padrick led the way through a half-rotted leather curtain. A wench sidled toward him with a croaked invitation, saw he was human, and withdrew. He chuckled. “The stews are no use to an Ershokh, worse luck,” he remarked. “Oh, well, things are free and easy in the Iron House.”

As the Wodenite entered, stillness fell on the crowded, smoky room. Knives slid forth at the wicker tables where the patrons sat. Torches guttering in sconces threw an uneasy light—dim and red to Adzel, bright to a native—on sleazy garments, avian faces, unwinking eyes. Padrick set down his flag and raised his hands. “Peace between our kindred,” he called. “You know me, Hugh of the Household, I’ve stood many a round. This is the Emperor’s guest. He’s big but gentle, and no demon’s trailing him. Any demon ’ud be scared to.”

A drunk in a corner cackled laughter. That eased the atmosphere somewhat. The customers returned to their drinks, though they kept looking sideways and doubtless their mutterings were now chiefly about this dragonish alien. Padrick found a backless chair and Adzel coiled on the dirt floor across from him. The landlord gathered courage to ask what they wanted. When Padrick pointed to Adzel and said munificently, “Fill him up,” the Ikranankan cocked his head, calculated probable capacity, and rubbed his hands.

The brandy, or gin or arrack or whatever you wanted to call a liquor distilled from extraterrestrial fruits, was no more potent than concentrated sulfuric acid. But it had a pleasant dry flavor. Adzel tossed off half a liter or so. “I must not be greedy,” he said.

“Don’t be shy. This is on me.” Padrick slapped a fat purse. “We draw good pay, I must say that for him on the Beast.”

“I have been wondering. Surely not all the Ershoka live in the Iron House.”

“No, no. You serve there between getting your commission, if you do, and getting married. And it’s phratry headquarters. But families take homes throughout New City, or they go to one of our ranches, Or whatever they like. After marrying, women usually lay down their arms. Men go drill once a year and naturally join the colors in an important war.”

“How then did Bobert Thorns contingent dare revolt? Their families at home were hostage to the Emperor.”

“Not so. If he touched a one of those left behind, we’d all rise, from Harry Smit on down to the youngest drummer boy, and set his head on a pike. But anyhow, a lot of the wives and kids went along. That’s usual, if there’s a siege or an extended campaign. Women make perfectly good camp guards, against these flimsy Ikranankans, and they’re our quartermasters and—” Padrick finished listing their functions.

That wouldn’t have been feasible, under such primitive conditions, if this were Earth. But few if any native germs affected humans. It made another reason why the Ershoka were prime soldiers. Before preventive medicine becomes known, disease thins armies more cruelly than battle.

“I sympathize with your plight,” Adzel said. “It cannot be easy, when you are so close-knit, to be in conflict with your own relatives.”

“Who said we were?” Padrick bridled. “That doddering Smit? The phratry bonds weren’t so strong when he was growing up. He’d never get anyone my age to march against Thorn.” He drained his beaker and signaled for more. “But seems the Iron House will obey its officers enough to stay neutral.”

To change a difficult subject, Adzel asked if he had seen Stepha Carls since her return. “I sure to curses have!” Padrick said enthusiastically. “What a girl!”

“A pleasant, if impulsive personality,” Adzel agreed.

“I wasn’t talking about personality. Though truth, she’s tough and smart as any man. Here’s to Stepha!”

Beakers clunked together. Seeing the dragon so convivial, the house relaxed yet more. Presently an Ikranankan drinking buddy of Padrick’s drifted over to his table and said hello. “Siddown!” the Ershokh bawled. “Have one on me.”

“I really should return,” Adzel said.

“Don’t be stupid. And don’t insult my good friend Rakshni. He’d like to make your ’quaintance.”

Adzel shrugged and accepted more booze. Others came to join the party. They started yarning, then they started arguing about the Rangakora situation—not very heatedly, since nobody in Old City cared what happened to the parvenu Emperor—and then they had a short brawl between three or four cutthroats that broke the last ice, and then they began toasting. They toasted their phratries and they toasted the wenches cuddling in among them and they toasted the memory of good King Argash and they toasted the Yanjeh River that kept Katandara alive and they toasted Lake Urshi that took charge of so many inconvenient corpses and they toasted Hugh Padrick often because he was buying and about then they lost track and the tetrahedral dice commenced to rattle and all in all they had quite a time. Booze was cheap and Padrick’s purse was full. The party ended at last more because the majority had passed out on the floor than because he went broke.

“I…mus’…really must…go back,” said Adzel. His legs seemed more flexible than he preferred, and his tail had made up its own mind to wag. That demolished most of the furniture, but the landlord didn’t object. He had passed out, too.

“Uh, yeh, yeh, reckon so.” Padrick lurched erect. “Duty calls.”

“In a shrill unpleasant voice,” Adzel said. “My friend, you have uh—hic!—wrong concep’. If you were at one wi’ the universe—now please don’ fall inna common error iden’ifying Nirvana with annihilation, matterfack’s t’ be achieved in this life—” He was no zealot, but he felt this fine chap reeling beside him deserved at least to have an accurate understanding of Mahayana Buddhism. So he lectured the whole way back. Padrick sang songs. Natives scurried out of the way.

“—an’ so,” Adzel droned, “you see reincarnation not at all necesshry to the idea uh Karma—”

“Wait.” Padrick halted. Adzel bent his neck down to regard him. They were near the gates of New City.

“Why, whuzzuh mazzuh?”

“Remembered an errand.” The Ershokh was acting sober with unexpected swiftness. Had he really matched the others drink for drink? Adzel hadn’t noticed. “You go on.”

“But I uz jus’ coming to the mos’ in’eresting part.”

“Later, later.” Wind ran down the empty street, driving sand, and ruffled the bronze hair. No one else was in sight. Odd, thought Adzel hazily. The citizens had retreated from him before, but not to that extent. And there was no equivalent of night time; the same proportion were always awake.

“Well, thank you f ’r a (whoops!) ver’ inshuck—insturruck—insurrect—in-structive ’shperience.” Adzel offered his hand. Padrick took it hurriedly, almost embarrassedly, and loped off. The sword jingled at his belt.

A strange place, this. Adzel's thoughts turned sentimentally back to Woden, the dear broad plains under the brilliant sun, where his hooves spurned kilometers…and after the chase, the fellowship of the campfire, friends, children, females…But that was long behind him. His family having been close associates of the League factor, they had wanted him to get a modern education; and he'd gotten one, and now he was so changed that he would never feel at home among the hunters. The females he didn't miss, being sexually stimulated only by the odor of one in rutting season. But a certain sense of belonging, an innocence, was forever gone. He wiped his eyes and trotted on, weaving from side to side of the street.

"There he comes!"

Adzel jerked to a stop. The space before the New City wall was a broad plaza. It swarmed with soldiers. He had some trouble estimating how many, for they kept doubling when he looked at them, like amoebas; but a lot, and every one a native. The gates were shut, with a line of catapults in front.

A cavalry troop bounded forward. "Halt, you!" shouted the leader. His lance head flashed bloody in the red light.

"I awready halted," said Adzel reasonably.

Though uneasy, the Imperial zandaras were well disciplined. They moved to encircle him. "Most noble," called the troop leader, in a rather nervous tone, "let us talk. Trouble is afoot and the Emperor, ak-krrr, desires your presence."

Adzel clapped a hand to his stomach—the scutes rang—and bowed. His neck kept on going till his snout hit the ground. That annoyed him, but he hung on to urbanity. "Why, sure, any ol' thing t' oblizhe. Le's go."

“Uk-k-k, as a matter of form only, most noble, the Emperor wishes you to, krrr-ek, wear these badges of dignity.” The officer waved forward a foot soldier, who obeyed without visible happiness. He carried a set of chains.

“What?” Adzel backed off. His mind wobbled.

“Hold, there!” the officer cried. “Hold or we shoot!” The catapult crews swiveled their weapons about. One of those engines could drive a steel-headed shaft through even a Wodenite.

“Bu-bu-buh wah’s wrong?” Adzel wailed.

“Everything. The demons must have broken all barriers. Your associate has vanished, with a good score of Ershoka. When he learned this, the Emperor sensed treachery and had the Iron House surrounded. Those inside grew angry and would not surrender. They shot at our own people!” The officer ran clawlike fingers through his ruff. His cloak flapped in the wind, his zandara made a skittish leap. Crossbows cocked where lances were not couched; his troopers held their ring about the Wodenite.

“What?” Confound that liquor! And no anti-intoxicants on hand. Adzel thumbed the switch of his transceiver. “David! Where are you? Whuh happen?”

Silence answered.

“David! ‘Merzh’ncy! Help!”

“Now keep still,” the officer chattered. “Hold out your wrists first. If you are blameless, you shall not be harmed.”

Adzel switched to the ship’s wavelength. “Che! You there?”

“Of course I am there,” said the waspish voice. “Where else would I be but where I am?”

Adzel recited a mantra or two under his breath. The beneficent influence cleared some of his private fog. He blurted out an explanation. “I’ll go ’long wi’m,” he said. “Peaceful. You come in uh ship. They’ll got…they will have to lemme go then, an’ we’ll look f ’ David.”

“At once,” said Chee.

A squad of magicians made frantic passes. Adzel turned to the officer “Yes, ’course I’ll hic th’ Emperor.” From the radio came an indistinct mumble. Chee must be talking with someone else. He extended his arms and opened his mouth. It was meant for a smile, but it showed an alarming array of fangs.

The officer pricked the chain-bearing infantryman with his lance. “Go on,” he said. “Do your duty.

“You do it,” whimpered the other.

“What do I hear? Do you contradict an order?”

“Yes.” The infantryman backed away. His mounted comrades opened a sympathetic way for him.

“Oh, come now,” said Adzel. He wanted to see Jadhadi and get to the bottom of this as fast as possible. He sprang forward. The cavalry yelped and scuttled aside.

“But I on’y wanna help!” Adzel roared. He caught the soldier, removed the chains, and set him down again. The Ikranankan curled into a little ball.

Adzel hunkered on his tail and considered. The links had gotten fouled. “How yuh ‘spec’ me to fasten these?” he asked pettishly. The more he tried to unsnarl the mess, the worse it got. The Imperial army watched in fascination.

A shout broke from the transceiver. “Adzel! Get away! The unsanctified creature of unmentionable habits has caught me!”

There followed sounds of scuffling, a sharp blow, and nothing.

For a lunatic instant Adzel thought he was back on the ship playing Lord Love a Duck: seven card stud, low hole card wild. He had a trey in reserve, which with another trey on the board completed a royal flush, and he raised till his pay was hocked for the next six months, and then came the final draw and he got a deuce. The alcohol fumes blew out of him and he realized he wasn’t actually in that situation. It merely felt that way.

The League trained its spacemen to react fast. He continued fumbling with the chains while his eyes flicked back and forth, assessing the terrain. Given a quick—yes, in yonder direction—and a certain amount of luck, he could make a break. But he mustn’t hurt any of these poor misguided souls, if that could possibly be avoided.

He gathered his thews and leaped.

A cavalry trooper was in his way. He scooped the Ikranankan up, zandara and all, and threw him into the detachment of spearmen beyond. Their line of grounded pikes broke apart. He bounded through. Yells exploded around him, with a sleet of crossbow quarrels. A catapult shaft buzzed his ears. The mounted officer laid lance in rest and charged from the side. Adzel didn’t see him in time. The steel point smote. It didn’t go in but met the radio at the Wodenite’s throat and smashed the case open. Adzel brushed past, still gathering speed. The zandara spun like a top, the rider went off in an arc.

A blank wall loomed ahead, four stories high. Adzel hit it at full velocity. Momentum carried him upward. He grabbed the verge and hauled himself over. The rough-surfaced stones gave sufficient grip. A catapult bolt struck by his flank, knocking out splinters of rock. Adzel crossed the roof, jumped to the next, dropped into an alley, and headed back toward Old City.

No help for him there, of course, except that he'd be hard to track through that maze. He'd get to Lake Urshi. They had nothing to chase a swimmer but clumsy rafts that he could easily outdistance. Once on the far shore, he'd strike across the Chakora. No word could reach Haijakata ahead of him—But damn the loss of his transceiver!

Well, Chee's would serve, after he'd bailed the little fluffbrain out of whatever trouble she'd gotten into. They'd raise ship, retrieve their flitter at the palace, and start looking for David. If David was alive. If they themselves stayed alive.

-6-

Perhaps there was something to the Katandaran theory that supernatural beings were uniformly malevolent. If Chee Lan had been aboard the spacecraft when Adzel called—But she herself, an uncompromising rationalist, would have said her luck, though bad, involved no great improbability. She had been spending almost half her time with Gujgengi. Both were anxious to learn as much as possible about each other's civilizations.

One new idea she introduced, not entirely to his liking, was that of regular appointments. Haijakata's lone clock kept such slapdash time that she presented him with a watch. After that, drums rolled and flags got replaced to signal a change of guard with some predictability; and she knew when to go uphill for another session.

The computer, which she had set to remind her, did so. "You might be more respectful," she grumbled, laying down her book. She had pretty well convinced her shipmates that the Cynthian volumes she had along were philosophical works (in fact, they were slushy love novels) but still she enjoyed the chance to read without inane interruptions.

“You did not program me to be respectful,” said the mechanical voice.

“Remind me to. No, cancel that. Who cares about a machine’s opinions?”

“No one,” said Muddlehead, which did not have rhetorical units.

Chee hopped off her bunk and made ready. Transceiver and taper in one hand, a ladylike needle gun at her waist, were all she needed. “Standby orders as usual,” she said, and went out the lock.

Muddlehead hummed quietly to itself. Standby meant that, although the Katandaran language had been added to its memory bank, it would only obey commands—voice, radio, or code—from one of the crew. However, Chee had connected the external speaker, in case she ever wanted to ask from the outside what the sensors observed.

The entry valve locked behind her and she scampered down the ramp. One hatch remained open immediately above the landing jacks, for an extra bolt-hole. There was no danger of natives wandering in and causing damage. Apart from their awe of the ship, the hatch merely led to the empty No. 4 hold, which no Ikranankan could harm, and *Muddlin Through* wouldn’t operate the door from it to ’tween-decks for anyone but a crew member. Chee prided herself on thinking ahead.

The crimson sun was whiter and brighter to her eyes than to Falkayn’s or Adzel’s. Nonetheless she found the landscape shadowy, swore when an unseen twig snagged the fur she had spent an hour grooming, and was glad to reach the highway. And the air drank moisture from her nose like Falkayn drinking after a cruise when the Scotch gave out; and the wind was as cold as van Rijn's heart; and it carried from the Chakora scents of vegetation akin to creosote and Gorgonzola. Oh, to be back on Ta-chih-chien-pi, Lifehome-under-Sky, again in a treetop house among forest perfumes! Why had she ever left?

Money, of course. Which she was currently not making, at a furious rate. She bottled her tail and hissed.

The sentries at the gate touched sword to beak in salute as her small form passed. After she was safely beyond, they fingered charms and whispered incantations. True, the newcomers had not caused any trouble so far, and in fact promised great benefits. But demons are notorious liars.

Chee would not have been surprised, or even offended, had she seen. More and more she was discovering how immensely conservative these Ikranankans were, how suspicious of everything new. That accounted for their being still prescientific, in spite of a fantastically long recorded history. She hadn't yet developed any explanation for the attitude itself.

She sprang lithely among the plaid-woven huts. A female sat outside one, putting food in the mouth of an infant. To that extent, Ikranankans were like Cynthians. Neither had mammary glands, the young being born equipped to eat solid food. (Cynthians use their lips to suck, not suckle.) But there the resemblance ended. An Ikranankans wife was little, ruffless, drab, and subservient. A female Cynthian, who must carry her cub through the trees—though not strictly arboreal, among endless forests the race has made the branches a second environment—is bigger than her mate, and every bit as tough a carnivore. Matrilineal descent is the norm, polyandry occurs in numerous cultures, and the past has known some outright matriarchies, Chee supposed that was why her planet was so progressive.

She popped in the door of the large cabin where Gujgengi had quartered himself. The envoy was seated at a table with his host, garrison commandant Lalnakh. They were playing some game that involved dropping colored sticks onto a board divided in squares.

Chee soared to the tabletop, nearly upsetting the frail wicker structure. "What's that?" she asked.

Lalnakh scowled. Gujgengi, more used to her unceremonious ways, said, "It is called *akritel,"* and explained. The rules were rather complicated, but in essence the game amounted to betting on how the sticks would fall. "Quite popular," Gujgengi added.

"Do you want to make your play or do you not?" Lalnakh snapped.

"Indeed, indeed. Give me time." Gujgengi adjusted his spectacles and pondered the distribution of rods that had already been dropped. The less likely a configuration he made, the more he would win; but if he failed to get a score within the range he declared, he would lose correspondingly. "I do believe my luck is normal today," he said, nodding at the stack of coins already before him. A galactic would have spoken of a run of good luck. "I will try to—" He chose his sticks and made his declaration.

"You shouldn't guess," Chee said. "You should know."

Lalnakh glared. "What do you mean?"

"Not the actual outcome," Chee said. "But what the chances are. Whether the chance of winning is good enough to justify the bet you make."

"How in Destruction can that be calculated?" Gujgengi asked.

"Play, curse you!" Lalnakh said.

Gujgengi rattled his sheaf of sticks and let them drop. He made his point.

"Arrr-k!" Lalnakh growled. "That does for me." He shoved his last coins across the table.

Gujgengi counted. "You appear to owe more," he said.

Lalnakh made a vile remark and fished in the pouch below his doublet. He threw a dull-white disk into Gujgengi's stack. "Will you take that? Rangkoran work. I've carried it for a talisman. But the demons were too strong for it today."

Gujgengi wiped his glasses and squinted. Chee had a look herself. The medallion bore a pleasing design, a wreath on the obverse and a mountain-scape on the reverse. But part of the silver had rubbed off. "Why, this is plated bronze," she said.

"An art they have there, among others," Gujgengi replied. "They put the metal in a bath and—I know not what. Strong magic. I was there once on an embassy, and they had me grip two copper threads coming out of a box, and something *bit* me. They laughed." He recollected his dignity. "But at any rate, being so magical, objects like this are prized. That makes yet another reason why the conquest of Rangakora is desirable."

"Which we could accomplish for you," Chee pointed out. "And, incidentally, we can sell you any amount of plated stuff ourselves."

"Ak-krrr. Understand, most noble, I have no authority to make so, uk-k-k, momentous?—yes, so momentous a decision. I am simply the Emperor's representative."

"You can make recommendations, can't you?" Chee pursued. "I know messengers go back and forth all the time."

"Uk-k-k, indeed. Shall we continue our previous discussions?"

"I'm going," Lalnakh said surlily.

That was when the transceiver spoke.

"Chee! You there?"

Adzel's voice, in badly slurred Anglic. Was the big slubber drunk? Chee hoped no Ershoka were present. Her skin prickled. "Of course—" she began, more tartly than she felt.

Lalnakh sprang aside, yanking out his dagger. Gujgengi rose and made industrious signs against evil. His glasses slipped off his beak to interrupt him.

"What the plague is this?" Lalnakh demanded.

"Where are my spectacles?" Gujgengi complained from the floor. "I cannot see my spectacles. Has a demon run away with them?"

"Protective magic," said Chee quickly in Katandaran, while the radio muttered with noise of a large crowd. "Nothing to fear."

"Help me find my spectacles," Gujgengi quacked. "I need my spectacles."

Lalnakh swore and retrieved them. Chee heard Adzel out. Her fur stood on end. But the self-possession of trouble came upon her, and her mind raced like a cryogenic calculator.

"At once," she said, and looked at the Ikranankans. They stared back, stiff and hostile.

"I must go," she said. "My magic has warned me of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Lalnakh rapped.

Gujgengi, more accustomed by now to outworld marvels, pointed a lean finger. "That was the monsters voice," he said. "But he is in the capital!"

"Well, yes," Chee said. Before she could improvise a story, Gujgengi went on:

"That must be a thing for speaking across distances. I had begun to suspect you possessed some such ability. Now, now, most noble, please do not insult me by denying the obvious. He has called you to his assistance, has he not?"

Chee could only nod. The Ikranankans trod closer, towering above her. She didn't want to be caught, later, in an outright lie; bad for future relations, which were ticklish enough already. "The Ershoka have rebelled," she said. "They are barricaded in the, what you call it, the Iron House. Adzel wants me to come and overawe them."

"No, you don't," Lalnakh told her; and Gujgengi: "I am distressed, most noble, but since your fellows arrived at the palace, I have been sent explicit orders that your conveyance is to remain in place."

"Sandstorms and pestilence!" Chee exclaimed. "Do you want a civil war? That's what you'll get, if the Ershoka aren't brought into line, and fast." The racket from the radio grew louder. "Use your judgment for a change. If we wanted Jadhadi's ruin, would I not sit here and let it happen?"

They paused. Lalnakh looked uncertain. Gujgengi scratched beneath his beak. "A point," he murmured. "Yes, a distinct point."

The set broke into a roar. Metal belled, voices howled, thuds and bumps shivered the speaker. A thin Ikranankan cry: "Help, the beast is killing me!"

Lalnakh started. Sunlight slanting into the gloomy room touched his knife with red. "Is that friendly?" the officer said, low in his throat.

Chee pulled her gun. "Some misunderstanding," she chattered. "I true-speak that we are your friends, and I'll shoot anyone who calls me a liar." Adzel's mild basso hiccuped forth, above an iron rattle. "Hear that? He isn't fighting, is he?"

"No," Lalnakh said. "Feeding."

Chee poised on the table. “I shall go,” she started. “I suggest you do not try to stop me.”

Gujgengi surprised her. She had taken him for a mere bumbling professor. He drew his sword and said quietly, “I am a Deodakh. Did I fail to try, they would read my ghost out of the phratry.”

Chee hesitated. She didn’t want to kill him. That would also louse up future negotiations. A disabling shot?

Her attention was distracted from Lalnakh. The officer’s hand swept through an arc. His knife smashed into her weapon. The impact tore it from her hand. He threw himself over her. She had barely time to cry a warning, then she was on the floor, pinioned.

“Hak-k-k,” Lalnakh grated. “Keep still, you!” He cuffed her so that her head rang, snatched off her transceiver and threw it aside.

“Now, now,” Gujgengi chided. “No violence, most noble, no violence until we learn whether violence is necessary. This is all most unfortunate.” He saluted Chee, where she lay in Lalnakh’s grasp. Simultaneously, he crushed the radio under his foot. “I shall dispatch a messenger at once. Until word comes, you shall be treated as honorably as circumstances allow.”

“Wait a bit!” Lalnakh said. “I am the garrison chief.”

“But my dear friend, it may conceivably turn out that some accommodation can be reached.”

“I doubt it. These creatures are demons, or demon-possessed. But jail her any way you like, as long as I can inspect your security arrangements. What I am going to do is post a guard on that flying house. With catapults, in case the giant arrives, and orders to kill if he does.”

“Well,” said Gujgengi, “that is not a bad idea.”

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Falkayn didn't black out. Rather, consciousness fragmented, as if he were at a final stage of intoxication. His mind went off on a dozen different tracks, none involving will power.

Sagging against the wall as the Ershoka released him, he was dizzily aware of its hardness at his back; of how the floor pressed with a planet's mass on his boot soles; of air chill and dry in his nostrils, soughing in his lungs, and the bitter drug odor; of his heart slamming; of red light a-sheen on the naked floor, and the dusky sky in a window across its expanse, which seemed to be tilting; of the big blond man who had mugged him, and the equally big red-head who supported him; of the redhead's nose, whose shape had some comic and probably sinister significance—He thought once that the Ikranankan stuff he'd breathed must have pharmaceutical possibilities; then he thought of his fathers castle on Hermes and that he really must write home more often; but in half a second he was remembering a party at Ito Yamatsu's place in Tokyo Integrate; and this, by an obvious association, recalled several young women to him; which in turn led him to wonder—

"Give me a hand, Owen," Stepha Carls muttered. "His batman'll be back soon. Or anybody might chance by."

She began to strip off Falkayn's clothes. The process could have been embarrassing if he weren't too muzzy to care, or fun if she'd been less impersonal. And, of course, if the blond warrior hadn't assisted. Falkayn did try to observe various curves as she handled him, but his brain wouldn't stay focused.

"All right." Stepha jerked her thumb at a bundle on the floor. The yellow-haired man unrolled it, revealing Ershoka garb. The cloth was coarse, the pants reinforced with leather: a cavalry field outfit. She started to dress Falkayn. Her job wasn't easy, the way he lolled in the redhead's arms.

The stupor was leaving, though. Almost, he tried to shout. But drilled-in caution, rather than wit, stopped him. Not a chance, yet. However, strength flowed back, the room no longer whirled, and presently they'd buckle on his dagger belt....

Stepha did so. He could have whipped out the knife and driven it into her back where she squatted before him. But that would be a dreadful waste. He lurched, sliding aside from the redhead. His hand brushed across the dagger haft, his fingers clamped, he drew and stabbed at the mans chest.

At! There was no blade, only a squared-off stub barely long enough to keep the thing in its sheath. The Ershokh took a bruise, no doubt; he recoiled with a whispered curse. Falkayn, still wobbly, staggered for the doorway. He opened his mouth to yell. The blond grabbed his arms and Stepha her wet rag. Tiger swift, she bounded forward and crammed it down his gape.

As he spun into pieces again, he saw her grin and heard her murmur genially, "Nice try. You're a man of parts in more ways than one. But we reckoned you might be."

She bent to take his guns. Light coursed along her braids. "Hoy!" said the blond. "Leave those."

"But they're his weapons," Stepha said. "I told you what they can do."

"We don't know what else they're good for, what black magic might be in 'em. Leave them be, I said."

The redhead, rubbing his sore ribs, agreed. Stepha looked mutinous. But there was scarcely time to argue. She sighed and rose. "Put the stuff in his cabinet, then, so they'll think he just stepped out, and let's go."

With a man on either side supporting him by his elbows, Falkayn lurched into the hall. He was too loaded to remember what the fuss was about and obeyed their urging mechanically. In this residential part of the palace, few were abroad. On the downramp they passed his servant, returning with a jug of ferocious booze. The Ikranankan didn't recognize him in his new clothes. Nor did anyone in the more crowded passages below. One official asked a question. "He got drunk and wandered off," Stepha said. "We're taking him to barracks."

"Disgraceful!" said the bureaucrat. Confronted by three armed and touchy Ershoka who were sober, he did not comment more.

After some time Falkayn was so far recovered that he knew they'd come to a sally port in the north wall. Cityward, the view was blocked by a row of houses. Some twenty Ershoka, most of them men, waited impatiently in battle dress. Four Tiruts, the sentries, lay bound, gagged, and indignant. The humans slipped out.

The canyon of the Yanjeh lay west of town, marked by leafy sides and the loud clear rush of water. There, too, the upland highway entered. Here was sheer desert, which rose sharply in crags, cliffs, and talus slopes, ruddy with iron oxide and sun, to the heights. In such a wilderness, the Ershoka vanished quickly.

"Move, you!" The blond jerked Falkayn's arm. "You're undoped by now."

"Uh-h-h, somewhat," he admitted. Normality progressed with every stone-rattling stride. Not that that did him much good, hemmed in by these thugs.

After a while they found a gulch. A good fifty zandaras milled about in the care of two Ikranankan riders. Several were pack animals, most were mounts and remounts. The band swung into their saddles. Falkayn got on more gingerly. The natives headed back toward town.

Stepha took the lead. They climbed until they were above the cliffs, on dunes where nothing lived but a few bushes. At their backs, and northward, Yanjeh Belt shone green. The city gloomed below them, and beyond, the Chakora reached flat and murky to the horizon. But they pointed themselves east and broke into full gallop.

No, hardly the word! Falkayn's zandara took off with an acceleration that nearly tore him from his seat. He knew a sick moment of free fall, then the saddle and his lower jaw rose and hit him. He flopped to the right. The man alongside managed to reach over and keep him from going off. By then the zandara was once more aloft. Falkayn bounced backward. He saved himself by grabbing the animal's neck. "Hoy, you want to strangle your beast?" someone yelled.

"As…a…matter…of…fact…yes," Falkayn gusted between bounces.

Around him gleamed helmets, byrnies, spearheads, gaudy shields, and flying cloaks. Metal clattered, leather creaked, footfalls drummed. Sweat and zandara musk filled the air. So did fine sand, whirled up in a cloud. Falkayn had a glimpse of Stepha, across the wild pack. The she-troll was laughing!

He gritted his teeth. (He had only meant to set them, but his mouth was full of sand.) If he was to survive this ride, he'd have to learn the technique.

Bit by bit, he puzzled it out. You rose slightly in the stirrups as the zandara came down, to take the shock with flexed knees. You swayed your body in rhythm with the pace. And, having thought yourself athletic, you discovered that this involved muscles you never knew you had, and that said muscles objected. His physical misery soon overwhelmed any speculation as to what this escapade meant.

A few times they stopped to rest and change steeds, and after some eternities to camp. That amounted to gulping down iron rations from the saddle-bags, with a miserly drink of water from your canteens. Then you posted guards, got into your bedroll, and slept.

Falkayn didn't know how long he had been horizontal when Stepha roused him. "Go 'way," he mumbled, and burrowed back into the lovely dark. She grabbed a handful of hair and yanked. Eventually she dragged him to breakfast.

Their pace was easier now, though, and some of the aches worked themselves out of Falkayn. He began to notice things. The desert was getting hillier all the time, and a little more fertile, too. The sun behind him was lower, shadows stretched enormous in front, toward the Sundhadarta mountains, whose slate-blue bulk was slowly lifting over the world's edge. The Ershoka had relaxed, they joked and laughed and sang some rather bloodthirsty songs.

Near the end of the "day," a lone rider with a few spare animals overtook them. Falkayn started. Hugh Padrick, by Satan! The Ershokh waved affably at him and rode to the head of the parade to confer with Stepha.

Those two were still talking when the second camp was made, on a hilltop among scattered vividly yellow bushes. The Ershoka didn't go to sleep at once but built small fires and lounged about in companionable groups. Falkayn let another man unsaddle his zandaras, hobble them and turn them out to graze. Himself, he sat down with the intention of sulking but got up fast.

A shadow in the long light fell across him. Stepha stood there. He must admit she was a handsome sight, big, full-bodied, queenly featured. More used to the chill than he, she'd stripped to blouse and kilt, which further lightened his mood.

"Come join us," she invited.

"Do I have a choice?" he said hoarsely.

The gray eyes were grave on his. She touched his hand in an almost timid fashion. "I'm sorry, David. No way to treat you. Not only after what you did for me. No, you deserve better'n this in your own right. But won't you let me explain?"

He followed her less grudgingly than he made out, to a fire where Padrick sat toasting some meat on a stick. "Hullo," the Ershokh said. A grin flashed white in his grimy beard. "Hope you liked the ride so far."

"What's become of Adzel?" Falkayn demanded.

"Dunno. Last I saw, he was headed for the palace, drunk's a brewmaster. Reckoned I'd better get out of town before the fun started, so I went back to Lake Urshi where I'd hid my animals and took off after you. Saw your dust a long ways off." Padrick lifted a leather bottle. "Took some booze."

"Do you suppose I'll drink with you, after—"

"David," Stepha pleaded. "Hear us out. I don't think your big friend can have gotten into deep trouble. They'd not dare hurt him when the little one still has your flyer. Or Jadhadi may decide right away you were snatched, 'stead of leaving of your will."

"I doubt that," Falkayn said. "A galactic might, but those Ikranankans see a conspiracy under every bed."

"We've made trouble for our own mates, too, in the Iron House," Stepha reminded him. "Could come to blows between them and the beak faces, what with nerves being strung so tight on both sides."

"That's a hell of a way to run a phratry," Falkayn said.

"No! We're working for their good. Only listen to us."

Stepha gestured at a saddle blanket spread over the ground. Falkayn yielded and lowered himself, reclining Roman fashion. The girl sat down beside him. Across the fire, Padrick chuckled tolerantly. "Dinner coming soon," he promised. "How about that drink?"

"Oh, the devil, all right!" Falkayn glugged. The thermonuclear liquid scorched some of the aches from him and blunted his worry about Adzel.

"You're Bobert Thorn's people, aren't you?" he asked.

"We are now," Stepha said. "Me alone, at first. You see, Thorn sends out spies, Ikranankans, that is. If they must be conquered, the Rangakorans would mostly rather have Ershoka than Deodaka; we seem to get along better. So some of their units are fighting on our side, and then there are the merchants and—Anyhow, it's not hard for one to sneak out and mingle with the besiegers, claiming to be a highland trader come to see if he can peddle anything. Or whatever."

Rotten security, Falkayn reflected. How come, in a race that suspected everyone not an in-law of being an outlaw?…Well, yes, such clannishness would make for poor liaison between different kin-regiments. Which invited, if not espionage, at least the gathering of intelligence.

"Jadhadi's people also got wind of you," Stepha said. "I reckon he alerted his top officers, and somebody blabbed." Falkayn could imagine the process: a Tirut or Yandaji ordered by a Deodakh to have secrets from his own relatives, getting mad and spilling the beans on principle. "Just dim, scary rumors seeped down to the ranks, you understand. But our spies heard them, too. We didn't know what they meant, and had to find out. Twilight was still over the area, so I got clear without being seen, rustled me a couple of zandaras, and headed off. A patrol near Haijakata did notice me, though. My spare mount took a quarrel. I bloody near did myself." She laughed and rumpled Falkayn's hair. "Thanks, David."

"And, of course, when you sounded us out and learned we were on Jadhadi's side, you pretended to be likewise," he nodded, mainly to rub his head against her palm. "But why'd you take the risk of coming back to Katandara with us?"

"Had to do something, didn't I? You meant to break us. I didn't know what I could swing, but I did know there must be a lot of people who wished they'd been sent to Rangakora, too. And I knew nobody in the Iron House would give me away to the Ikranankans." Stepha grinned mischievously. "Oh, but old Harry Smit was mad! He wanted to court-martial me on the spot. But too many others wouldn't have it. He settled for confining me to barracks while he tried to figure out some answer to the whole mess. That was a mistake. I could sit there and talk, whenever he wasn't around. I could guess who to talk most with, too—old friends and lovers that I knew well."

"Huh?" said Falkayn. Padrick looked smug.

"So we plotted," Stepha said. "We waited for a chance to act. Hugh hired a couple of his Old City buddies to buy animals and supplies and keep them stashed. We'd money enough between us, our gang. Then he went and got to know you. Plain, we'd never snatch you from Adzel. Would've been simpler if you'd gone out with Hugh. But when you let Adzel go first, we reckoned we'd better not lose more time. One by one, our people found excuses to stroll into town. Owen and Ross smuggled me out the back. We headed for your apartment. Nasty shock when you weren't there! But you must've gone to an Imperial audience, so we waited and hoped. Glad we did."

Falkayn took another comforting swig, rolled over on one elbow, and looked hard at the girl. "What's the point of this fantastic stunt?" he demanded.

"To stop you from helping Jadhadi," Padrick said. "Maybe even get you to help us. We're your fellow humans, after all."

"So are the Ershoka back in Katandara."

"But we're doing this for them also," Stepha insisted. "Why should our phratry be hirelings, and have to live under law and custom never meant for them, when they could be masters of their own country?"

"A better country than back yonder, anyhow," Padrick said.

"Bobert Thorn's thought," Stepha agreed. "He hoped the Ershoka would break from Jadhadi and come join him as soon as they learned what he'd done. Be tough, we know, cutting a way through the Imperial army. There'd be lives lost. But it could be done"—her voice rang forth—"and well worth the price!"

"You may have provoked matters so far by snatching me that the Ershoka won't have any choice," Falkayn admitted bitterly. "And for what? Didn't I tell you that you can all be returned to Earth?"

Stepha's eyes widened. Her hand went to her mouth. "Oh! I forgot!"

"Too late now," Padrick laughed. "Besides, take time to fetch your flyers, right, David? Meanwhile, what's to happen at Rangakora? And...I'm not sure I'd want to leave. Earth ways may be too different, worse than Katandara."

"Very well," Falkayn said. "You've succeeded this far. You've made trouble in the capital. You've prevented our ship taking action till my mates find what's become of me. You may have driven a wedge between us and Jadhadi. But don't think we'll do your dirty work for you."

"I wish you would, though," Stepha murmured, an stroked his cheek.

"Now cut that out, girl! I come to curry Caesarism, not to raze it."

"No matter," said Padrick. "Long's your, uh, ship keeps hands off"—Falkayn had a brief giddy vision of *Muddlin' Through* with hands—"we'll manage. And it'll sure do that while we've got you."

"Unless she rescues me, knocking down your damned walls in the process."

"They try," said Padrick, "and they'll find you in two pieces. We'll let 'em know that, if they do show up." He didn't even have the decency to sound grim.

"It'd be such a pity," Stepha cooed. "We've hard begun our friendship, David."

"Meat's cooked," said Padrick.

Falkayn resigned himself. He didn't mean to stay passive longer than he must. However, food, drink, and a pretty woman constituted a situation which he could accept with an equanimity that would make Adzel proud of him. *(Adzel, you scaly old mutt, are you safe? Yes. You've got to be. All you need do is radio Chee for help.*) The conversation at dinner was amicable and animated. Padrick was a fine fellow after several drinks, and Stepha was a supernova. The only fault he could find, at length, was that they insisted on switching off the party to rest for the next stage. Dismal attitude.

His watch had been left behind with everything else, but as near as he could tell, the Ershoka had a well-developed time sense. The ancient cycles of Earth still governed them. An hour to get started, sixteen hours—with short breaks—to travel, an hour to make camp and relax, six hours' sleep, divided roughly between two changes of guard. Not that there was much to fear, in this wasteland.

But the country grew yet greener as the sun sank, until the Sundhadarta foothills were carpeted with mosslike growth, brooks rilled, and forests of plumed stalks swayed in the wind. Once clouds massed in the north, colored hot gold. The mountains rose sheer to east, aglow in the level red light. Falkayn saw snow peaks and glaciers. Above them the sky was a royal purple deepening toward black, where fifty stars and a planet glimmered. They were at the edge of the Twilight Zone.

Not only did the atmosphere diffuse enough light to make a belt of dusk; Ikrananka had a rather eccentric orbit, and so librated. The gloaming swept back and forth across these lands, once in each seventy-two-day year. At present it had withdrawn, and the sun stood a little above the western piedmont. The slopes reflected so much heat, and so much infrared got through at this altitude, that the region was actually warmer than Katandara. The precipitation of the cold season was melting, and rivers foamed down the cliffs. Falkayn understood now why Rangakora was coveted.

He estimated that the party had traveled about five Terrestrial days, covering some four hundred kilometers, when they turned south toward the eastern end of the Chakora. A shoulder thrust huge before them and they must climb, up toward the snow cone of Mount Gundra. Falkayn had gotten used to the saddle and let his zandara do the struggling while he admired the tremendous view and reminisced about his last session by the campfire. Padrick had gone off with some other girl, leaving him and Stepha alone. Well, not exactly alone; no privacy, with people scattered around; but still, he reflected, his captivity might turn out to have compensations…

They rounded a precipice and Rangakora stood above them.

The city was built athwart a pass over the range, on a small plateau. A road of sorts wound heavenward from it, and on this side precipitously down toward the sea bottom. That glimmered misty, marshy, intensely green and gold. A river coursed near the wall. For the most part it was hidden by forest, but just above Rangakora it leaped over a sheer cliff and thundered in a waterfall crowned by rainbows. Falkayn caught his breath.

The Ershoka halted and drew together. Shields went onto arms, sabers into hands, crossbows were cocked and lances couched. Falkayn realized with a gulp that now was no time to contemplate scenery.

The plateau's verdure was scarred by feet. Campfires smoked around the city's rough walls, tents crowded and banners flew. Tiny at this remove, Jadhadi's people sat in clumps before the prize from which they had been expelled. "We'll make a rush," Padrick said. The wind and the cataract boomed around his words. "Thorn's folk'll see us and sally forth to fetch us in."

Stepha brought her animal next to Falkayn's. "I'd not want you to get ideas about bolting and surrendering to the others," she smiled sweetly.

"Oh, hell," said Falkayn, who already had them.

She looped a cord from her saddlebow to his zandara's bridle. Another girl tied his right ankle to the stirrup. He had often been told about the moral and psychological value of absolute commitment, but this seemed a bit extreme.

“Battle formation!” Padrick called. His sword flew clear. “Charge!”

The beasts bounded forward. Drums beat staccato alarm from the Imperial outposts. A cavalry squadron marshaled themselves and started full tilt to intercept. Their lances flashed intolerably bright.

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Being as prone to disorderly conduct as most races, the Ikranankans needed jails. Haijakata’s was a one-room cabin near the market square. An interior grid of stout stalks, closely lashed together, protected the woven outside walls against any tenants. If a prisoner wanted light, he could draw back the door curtain; but the wooden-barred gate beyond would remain locked. Furniture amounted to a straw tick and some clay utensils. Chee had broken one of these and tried to cut her way out with a shard. It crumbled, showing that while her captors might be crazy, they were not stupid.

A click and rattle snapped her out of a rather enjoyable reverie. The gate creaked open, the curtain was pulled aside, relieving the purplish dusk, and Gujgengi’s spectacles glittered. “I was just thinking about you,” Chee said.

“Indeed?” The mandarin sounded flattered. “May I ask what?”

“Oh, something humorous, but lingering, with either boiling oil or melted lead. What do you want?”

“I…uk-k-k…may I come in?” The curtain drew wider. Behind the gaunt, robed form, Chee saw a couple of armed and alert guards, and beyond them a few civilians haggling at the market booths. The quarantine had reduced trade to a minimum. “I wish to ascertain if you are satisfactorily provided for.”

“Well, the roof keeps off the rain.”

“But I have told you that rainfall is unknown west of Sundhadarta.”

“Exactly.” Chee’s glance fell wistful on the saber at Gujgengi’s side. Could she lure him in alone and snatch that—No, he need only fend off an attack and holler. “And why can’t I have my cigarettes? That is, those fire-tubes you have seen me put in my mouth.”

“They are inside your house, most noble, and while the house does not appear to resent being guarded, it refuses to open for us. I asked.”

“Take me there, and I will give it orders.”

Gujgengi shook his head. “No, I regret. That involves too many unknown powers you might unleash. When the present, ak-krrr, deplorable misunderstanding has been cleared up, yes, indeed, most noble. I have dispatched couriers posthaste to Kantandara, and we should receive word before long.” Taking an invitation for granted, he stepped through. The soldiers closed the awkward padlock.

“Meanwhile poor Adzel arrives and gets himself killed by your hotheads,” Chee said. “Pull that curtain, you dolt! I don’t want those yokels gaping in at me.”

Gujgengi obeyed. “Now I can scarcely see,” he complained.

“Is that my fault? Sit down. Yes, there’s the bedding. Do you want some booze? They gave me a crockful.”

“Ek-k-k, well, I ought not.”

“Come on,” Chee urged. “As long as we drink together, we are at least not deadly enemies.” She poured into a clay bowl.

Gujgengi tossed off the dose and accepted a refill. “I do not perceive you drinking,” he said in a heavy-footed attempt at humor. “Do you plan to get me intoxicated, perhaps?”

Well, Chee thought with a sigh, *it was worth trying.*

Briefly, she grew rigid. The jolt passed, her mind hummed into overdrive, she relaxed her body and said, “There isn’t much else to do, is there?” She took the vessel and drank. Gujgengi couldn’t see what a face she made. Pah!

“You malign us, you know,” she said. “We have none but the friendliest intentions. However, if my comrade is killed when he arrives, expect revenge.”

“Krrr-ek, he will be only if he grows violent. Somewhat against Commandant Lalnakh’s wish, I have posted criers who will shout warnings that he is to stay away. I trust he will be sensible.”

“Then what do you plan to do about him? He has to eat.” Gujgengi winced. “Here, have another drink,” Chee said.

“We, ak-krrr, we can try for some accommodation. Everything depends on what message I get from the capital.”

“But if Adzel has headed this way, he will be here well before that. Come on, drink and I’ll recharge the bowl.”

“No, no, really, this is quite enough for an oldster like me.”

“I don’t like to drink alone,” Chee urged.

“You have not taken much,” Gujgengi pointed out. “I’m smaller than you.” Chee drained the vessel herself and glugged out some more from the crock. “Though you would be astonished at my capacity,” she added.

Gujgengi leaned forward. “Very well. As an earnest of my own wish for friendship, I will join you.” Chee could practically read his thought: *Get her drunk and she may reveal something.* She encouraged him with a slight hiccup.

He kept his own intake low, while she poured the stuff down at an ever mounting rate. Nonetheless, in the course of the next hour or so, his speech grew a little slurred.

He remained lucid, however, in contrast to Chee. He was not unsubtle about trying to trap her into an admission that Falkayn must have engineered the trouble in Katandara. When her denials grew belligerent, he abandoned that line. “Let us discuss something else,” he said. “Your capabilities, for example.”

“I’m’sh capable’sh you,” Chee said.

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“More sho.”

“Well, you have certainly revealed—”

“Prettier, too.”

“Uk-k-k, tastes vary, you know, tastes vary. But I must concede you an intrinsic—”

“So I’m not beautiful, huh?” Chee’s whiskers dithered. “On the contrary, most noble. Please, I beg you—”

“Sing real good, too. Lisshen.” Chee rose to her feet, bowl in hand, and staggered about waving her tail and caterwauling. Gujgengi folded his ears.

Ching, chang, guli, guli vassa,
Ching, chang, guli, guli bum.

“Most melodious! Most melodious! I fear I must be on my way.” Gujgengi stirred where he sat on the mattress.

“Don’ go, ol’ frien’,” Chee pleaded. “Don’ lea’ me ’lone.”

“I will be back. I—”

“Oops!” Chee reeled against him. The bowl swept across his glasses. They fell. Chee grabbed after them. She came down on top, with the bowl. There was a splintering.

“Help!” Gujgengi cried. “My spectacles!”

“Sho shorry, sho shorry.” Chee fumbled around after the pieces.

The guards got in as fast as they could. Chee retreated. Gujgengi blinked in the sudden brightness. “What’s wrong, most noble?” asked a soldier. His sword was out

“Li’l accshiden’,” Chee babbled. “Ver’ shorry. I fix you up.”

“Stand back!” The saber poked in her direction. The other guard stooped and collected the pieces.

“It was doubtless unintentional,” Gujgengi said, making signs against demons. “I think you had best get some sleep now.”

“Fix you up. Got doctors, we do, fix your eyes sho you never need glasshes.” Chee was surprised at her own sincerity. The Imperial envoy wasn’t such a bad sort, and doubtless he’d have a devil of a time getting replacements. Katandaran optometry must be a crude cut-and-try business.

“I have spares,” Gujgengi said. “Conduct me to my residence.” He saluted Chee and shuffled out. She rolled over on her tick and closed her eyes.

“Too mush light,” she complained. “Draw ’at curtain.”

They obeyed, before locking the gate again. She waited a few minutes until she rose, though, and continued to emit realistic snores.

The liquor made her stomach uneasy. But it hadn’t affected her mind. Ethanol is a normal product of Cynthian metabolism. And…unseen in murk, by Gujgengi's weak eyes, she had palmed a couple of the largest fragments and slipped them under the mattress.

She ripped the ticking with her teeth, for rags to protect her hands, and got busy at the far end of the hut.

The glass wasn't very hard. As edges wore down, it sawed with ever less efficiency on the lashings of the framework. She could use pressure flaking to resharpen—a League academy gives a broad practical education—but only a few times before the chunks got too small to handle. "Hell and damnation!" she shouted when one of them broke completely.

"What's that?" called a voice from outside.

"Z-z-z-z," snored Chee.

A human would have sweated through that slow hour, but she was philosophical about the possibility of failing. Also, she needed less of an opening than a man would. Nonetheless, she barely finished before her tools wore to uselessness.

Now, arch your spine, pour through your arms and legs the strength they won leaping from branch to branch in the forests of home…ugh!…the canes bent aside, she squirmed through, they snapped back into position and she was caught against the outer wall. Its fabric was rough against her nose. Panting, shivering in the chill gloom, she attacked with teeth and nails. One by one, the fibers gave way.

Quick, though, before somebody noticed!

A rent appeared, ruddy sunlight and a windowless carpet wall across a deserted lane. Chee wriggled out and ran.

The city gates might or might not be watched too closely. But in either case, crossing that much distance, she'd draw half the town after her.

somebody could intercept her; or a crossbow could snap. She streaked around the jail and onto the plaza.

The natives screeched. A foodwife ducked behind her wares. A smith emerged from his shop, hammer in hand. Her guards took off after her. Ahead was a kiosk, at the center of the square. Chee sprang through its entrance.

Rough-hewn steps wound downward into the hill. A dank draft blew in her face. The entrance disappeared from sight and she was in a tunnel, dug from earth and stone, lit at rare intervals by shelved lamps. She stopped to pinch the wicks of the first two. Though she must then slow, groping until she reached the next illuminated spot, the Ikranankans were more delayed. Their cries drifted to her, harsh and distorted by echoes. Not daring to meet the unknown in the dark, they'd have to go back for torches.

By that time she was out at the bottom of the hill. A short stone passage led to a room with a well in the middle. A female let go the windlass handle and jumped onto the coping with a scream. Chee ignored her. The gate here was open and unguarded when the town faced no immediate threat. She'd seen that before, at the time Gujgengi gave her party the grand tour. She bounded from the tower, forth into brush and sand.

A glance behind showed turmoil at Haijakata's portals. She also glimpsed *Muddlin' Through,* nose thrusting bright into the sky. For a moment she debated whether to try regaining the ship. Once aboard, she'd be invincible. Or a shouted command for the vessel to lift and come get her would suffice.

No. Spears and shields ringed in the hull. Catapults crouched skeletal before them. She'd never get within "earshot" without being seen, nor finish a wigwag sentence before a quarrel pierced her. And Muddlehead hadn't been programmed to do anything without direct orders, no matter what the detectors observed.

Oh, well. Adzel could set that right. Chee started off. Before long she was loping parallel to the Haijakata road, hidden by the farm crops that lined it, all pursuit shaken.

The air was like mummy dust—thin mummy dust—and she grew thirstier by the minute. She managed to suppress most symptoms by concentrating on how best to refute a paper she'd seen in the *Journal of Xenobiology* before they left Earth. The author obviously had hash for brains and fried eggs for eyes.

Even so, eventually she had to get a drink and a rest. She slanted across the fields toward a canebrake that must mark a spring. There she glided cautiously, a shadow among shadows, until she peered out at the farmstead it enclosed.

Adzel was there. He stood with a pig-sized animal, from a pen of similar beasts, hooting in his arms, and said plaintively to the barred and shuttered central keep: "But my good fellow, you must give me your name."

"For you to work magic on?" said a hoarse male voice from within.

"No, I promise you. I only wish to give you a receipt. Or, at least, know whom to repay when I am able. I require food, but I do not intend to steal."

A dart whined from an arrow slot. He sighed. "Well, if you feel that way —"

Chee came forth. "Where's some water?" she husked.

Adzel started. "You! Dear friend, what in the universe has happened to you?"

“Don’t ‘dear friend’ me, you klong. Can’t you see I’m about to dry up and blow away?”

Adzel tried to bristle. Having no hair, he failed. “You might keep a civil tongue in your head. You would be astonished at how much less detested that can make you. Here I have been traveling day and night—”

“What, clear around the planet?” Chee gibed. Adzel surrendered and showed her the spring. The water was scant and muddy, but she drank with some understanding of what Falkayn meant by vintage champagne. Afterward she sat and groomed herself. “Let’s catch up on our news,” she proposed.

Adzel butchered the animal while she talked. He had no tools for the job, but didn’t need them either. In the end, he looked forlorn and said: “Now what shall we do?”

“Call the ship, of course.”

“How?”

Chee noticed for the first time that his transceiver was also broken. They stared at each other.

Gujgengi adjusted his spare glasses. They didn’t fit as well as the old ones had. The view was fuzzy to his eyes. *This might be preferable, though,* he thought. *The thing is so* huge. *And so full of sorcery. Yes, I do believe that under present circumstances I am quite satisfied not to see it too clearly.*

He gulped, mustered his whole courage, and tottered a step closer. At his back, the soldiers watched him with frightened expressions. That nerved him a trifle. *Must show them we Deodaka are uniformly fearless and so forth.* Though he would never have come except for Lalnakh. Really, the Commandant had behaved like a desert savage. One knew the Tiruts weren't quite one's equals—who was?—but one had at least taken them for a civilized phratry. Yet Lalnakh had stormed and raved so about the prisoner escaping that… well, from a practical standpoint, too, it would not help Gujgengi's reputation. But chiefly for the honor of the bloodline, one must answer the Tirut's unbridled tirade with stiff dignity and an offer to go consult the flying house. Would the Commandant care to be along? No? Excellent. One did not say so immediately, for fear of provoking him into changing his mind, but when one returned, one might perhaps drop a hint or two that most noble Lalnakh had not *dared* come. Yes, one must maintain a proper moral superiority, even at the risk of one's life.

Gujgengi swallowed hard. "Most noble," he called. His voice sounded strange in his ears.

"Are you addressing me?" asked the flat tones from overhead.

"Ak-krrr, yes." Gujgengi had already had demonstrated to him, before the present wretched contretemps, that the flying house (no, the word was *shi',* with some unpronounceable consonant at the end, was it not?) could speak and think. Unless, to be sure, the strangers had deceived him, and there was really just someone else inside. If so, however, the someone had a peculiar personality, with little or no will of its own.

"Well?" said Gujgengi when the silence had stretched too far.

"I wait for you to proceed," said the shi'.

"I wish, most noble, to ask your intentions."

"I have not yet been told what to intend."

"Until then you do nothing?"

"I store away whatever data I observe, in case these are required at a later time."

Gujgengi let out a hard-held breath. He'd hoped for something like this. Greatly daring, he asked: "Suppose you observed one of your crew in difficulties. What would you do?"

"What I was ordered to do, within the limits of capability."

"Nothing else? I mean, krrr-ek, would you take no action on your own initiative?"

"None, without verbal or code orders. Otherwise there are too many possibilities for error."

Still more relieved, Gujgengi felt a sudden eagerness to explore. One had one's intellectual curiosity. And, of course, whatever was learned might conceivably find practical application. If the newly come Ershokh and his two eldritch companions were killed, well, the shi' would still be here. Gujgengi turned to the nearest officer. "Withdraw all personnel a distance," he said. "I have secrets to discuss."

The Tirut gave him a suspicious glance but obeyed. Gujgengi turned back to the shi'. "You are not totally passive," he pointed out. "You answer me in some detail."

"I am so constructed. A faculty of logical judgment is needed."

"Ak-krrr, do you not get, shall we say, bored sitting here?"

"I am not constructed to feel tedium. The rational faculty of me remains automatically active, analyzing data. When no fresh data are on hand, I rehearse the logical implications of the rules of poker."

"What?"

"Poker is a game played aboard my hull."

"I see. Uk-k-k, your responsiveness to me is most pleasing."

"I have been instructed to be nonhostile to your people. 'Instructed' is the closest word I can find in my Katandaran vocabulary. I have not been instructed not to reply to questions and statements. The corollary is that I should reply."

Excitement coursed high in Gujgengi. "Do you mean—do I understand you rightly, most noble—you will answer any question I ask?"

"No. Since I am instructed to serve the interests of my crew, and since the armed force around me implies that this may have come into conflict with your interests, I will release no information which might enhance your strength."

The calmness was chilling. And Gujgengi felt disappointed that the shi' was not going to tell him how to make blasters. Still, a shrewd interrogator might learn something. "Would you advise me about harmless matters, then?"

The wind blew shrill, casting whirls of grit and tossing the bushes, while the hidden one considered. Finally: "This is a problem at the very limits of my faculty of judgment. I can see no reason not to do so. At the same time, this expedition is for the purpose of gaining wealth. The best conclusion I can draw is that I should charge you for advice."

"But, but how?"

"You may bring furs, drugs, and other valuables, and lay them in that open doorway you presumably see. What do you wish me to compute?"

Taken aback, Gujgengi stuttered. He had a potential fortune to make, he knew, if only he could think…Wait. He remembered a remark Chee Lan had made in Lalnakh's house before her arrest. "We play a game called *akritel,*" he said slowly. "Can you tell me how to win at it?"

"Explain the rules."

Gujgengi did so. “Yes,” the shi’ said, “this is simple. There is no way to win every time without cheating. But by knowing the odds on various configurations that may be achieved, you can bet according to those odds and therefore be ahead in the long run, assuming your opponents do not. Evidently they do not, since you ask, and since Drunkard’s Walk computations involve comparatively sophisticated mathematics. Bring writing materials and I will dictate a table of odds.”

Gujgengi restrained himself from too much eagerness. “What do you want for this, most noble?”

“I cannot be entirely certain. Let me weigh what information I have, in order to estimate what the traffic will bear.” The shi’ pondered awhile, then named what it said was a fair amount of trade goods. Gujgengi screamed that this would impoverish him. The shi’ pointed out that in that case he need not buy the information. It did not wish to haggle. Doubtless there were others who would not find the fee excessive.

Gujgengi yielded. He’d have to borrow a sum to pay for that much stuff; still, with the market depressed by the quarantine, the cost wouldn’t be unmanageable. Once he left this miserable hamlet and returned to Katandara, where they gambled for real stakes—

“Did you learn anything, most noble?” asked the officer as Gujgengi started uphill again.

“Yes,” he said. “Most potent information. I will have to pay a substantial bribe, but this I will do out of my own pocket, in the interests of the Emperor. Ak-krrr…see to it that no one else discourses with the shi’. The magic involved could so easily get out of hand.”

“Indeed, most noble!” shuddered the officer.

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The heroes of adventure fiction can go through any harrowing experience and—without psychochemicals, usually without sleep, always without attending to bodily needs—are at once ready to be harrowed all over again. Real people are built otherwise. Even after a possible twelve hours in the sack, Falkayn felt tired and sore. He hadn't been hurt during that wild ride through the Katandaran lines, but bolts zipped nastily close, and Stepha sabered an enemy rider seconds before he reached the Hermetian. Then Bobert Thorn's people sallied, beat off the opposition, and brought the newcomers into Rangakora. Falkayn wasn't used to coming that near death. His nerves were still tied in knots.

It didn't help that Stepha was utterly cheerful as she showed him around the palace. But he must admit that the building fascinated him. Not only was it more light and airy than anything in Katandara, not only did it often startle him with beauty; it held the accumulated wealth of millennia less violent than further west. There were even interior doors such as he knew at home, of bronze cast in bas reliefs; reasonably clear glass windows; steam heating.

They left the electroplating shop, a royal monopoly operated in the palace, and strolled to a balcony. Falkayn was surprised at how far the grave philosophers had progressed: lead-acid batteries, copper wire, early experimentation with a sort of Leyden jar. He could understand why this was a more congenial society for humans than Katandara.

"Jeroo, there's Thorn himself, and the King," Stepha exclaimed. She led Falkayn to the rail where they stood. His two guards tramped behind. They were friendly young chaps, but they never left him and their weapons were loose in the scabbards.

Thorn put down the brass telescope through which he had been looking and nodded. “That camp gets sloppier every watch,” he said. “They’re demoralized, right enough.”

Falkayn glanced the same way. The palace was a single unit, many-windowed, several stories high. He was near the top. No wall surrounded it, simply a garden, and beyond that the city. Like Katandara, Rangakora was so old as to be almost entirely stone-built. But the houses here were a symphony of soft whites, yellows, and reds. Facing outward rather than inward, with peaked tile roofs and graceful lines, they reminded him somewhat of First Renaissance architecture on Earth. Traffic moved on comparatively wide, paved avenues, distance-dwarfed figures, a faint rumble of wheels and clatter of feet. Smoke drifted into a Tyrian sky where a few clouds wandered. Behind, the heights soared gray-blue to Mount Gundra, whose snowcap glowed gold with perpetual sunset. The falls tumbled on his right, white and green and misted with rainbows, querning their way down to a Chakora which here was brilliant with fertility.

His gaze stopped short, at the besiegers. Beyond the city ramparts, their tents and campfires dotted the plateau, their animals grazed in herds and metal flashed where the soldiers squatted. Jadhadi must have sent powerful reinforcements when he learned of the rebellion. “I’d still not like to take them on, the way they outnumber your effectiveness,” he said.

Bobert Thorn laughed. He was a stocky, grizzle-bearded man with fierce blue eyes. Old battle scars and well-worn saber stood out against his embroidered scarlet tunic and silky trousers. “No hurry,” he said. “We’ve ample supplies, more than they’re able to strip off the country. Let ’em sit for a while. Maybe the rest of the Ershoka will arrive. If not, come next twilight they’ll be so hungry and diseased, and half blinded to boot, we can rout ’em. They know that themselves, too. They haven’t much guts left.” He turned to the slim red-pelted young Ikranankan in saffron robe and gilt chaplet. “King Ursala, this here’s the man from Beyond-the-World I told you about.”

The monarch inclined his avian head. “Greeting,” he said, in a dialect not too thick to follow. “I have been most anxious to meet you. Would the circumstances had been friendlier.”

“They might be yet,” Falkayn hinted.

“Not so, if your comrades carry out their threat to bring us under Katandara,” said Ursala. His mild tone softened the import.

Falkayn felt ashamed. “Well, uh, there we were, strangers with no real knowledge. And what’s so bad about joining the Empire? Nobody there seemed to be ill treated.”

Ursala tossed his ruff and answered haughtily: “Rangakora was ancient when Katandara was a village. The Deodaka were desert barbarians a few generations ago. Their ways are not ours. We do not set phratry against phratry, nor decree that a son is necessarily born into his father’s profession.”

“That so?” Falkayn was taken aback.

Stepha nodded. “Phratries here’re just family associations,” she said. “Guilds cut right across them.”

“That’s what I keep telling you, most noble,” said Thorn self-righteously. “Once under the protection of the Ershoka—”

“Which we did not ask for,” Ursala interrupted.

“No, but if I hadn’t decided to take over, Jadhadi’s viceroy would be here now.”

"I suppose you are the best of a hard bargain," sighed the King. "The Irshari may have favored us too long; we seem to have lost skill in war. But let us be honest. You will exact a price for your protection, in land, treasure, and power."

"Of course," said Thorn.

To break an uncomfortable silence, Falkayn asked who or what the Irshari might be. "Why, the makers and rulers of the universe," said Ursala. "Are you as superstitious in Beyond-the-World as they are in the Westlands?"

"Huh?" Falkayn clenched his fists. A shiver ran through him. He burst into questions.

The responses upset every preconception. Rangakora had a perfectly standard polytheistic religion, with gods that wanted sacrifices and flattery but were essentially benevolent. The only major figure of evil was he who had slain Zuriat the Bright, and Zuriat was reborn annually while the other gods kept the bad one at bay.

But then the Ikranankans were not paranoid by instinct!

What, then, had made the western cultures think that the cosmos was hostile?

Falkayn's mind leaped: not at a conclusion, he felt sure, but at a solution that had been staring him in the face for weeks. Ikrananka's dayside *had no seasons.* There was no rhythm to life, only an endless struggle to survive in a slowly worsening environment. Any change in nature was a disaster, a sand-storm, a plague, a murrain, a drying well. No wonder the natives were suspicious of everything new, and so by extension of each other. No wonder that they only felt at ease with fully initiated members of their own phratries. No wonder that civilizations were unstable and the barbarians free to come in so often. Those poor devils!

Rangakora, on the edge of the Twilight Zone, knew rain and snow and quickening, in the alternation of day and dusk. It knew, not just a few isolated stars, but constellations; after its people had ventured into the night land, it knew them well. In short, Falkayn thought, while the local citizens might be S.O.B.'s, they were Earth's kind of S.O.B.'s.

But then—

No. Rangakora was small and isolated. It simply hadn't the capability of empire. And, with the factions and wild raiders on this planet, van Rijn would deal with nothing less than an empire. Turning coat and helping out this city might be a quixotic gesture, but the Polesotechnic League didn't go in for tilting at windmills. A liberated Rangakora would be gobbled up again as soon as the spaceship left; for there would be no further visits.

Yet its steadying influence could prove invaluable to outworld traders. Wasn't some compromise possible?

Falkayn glanced despairingly heavenward. When in hell was *Muddlin' Through* going to arrive? Surely Chee and Adzel would look first for him here. Unless something dreadful had happened to them.

He grew aware that Ursala had spoken to him and climbed out of his daze. "Beg pardon, most noble?"

"We use no honorifics," the King said. "Only an enemy needs to be placated. I asked you to tell me about your home. It must be a marvelous place, and the Irshari know I could use some distraction."

"Well—uh—"

"I'm interested, too," said Thorn. "After all, if we Ershoka are to leave Ikrananka, that throws everything off the wagon. We might as well pull out of Rangakora now." He didn't look too happy about it.

Falkayn gulped. When the humans were evacuated to Earth, he himself would be a public hero, but van Rijn would take him off trade pioneering. No doubt he'd still have a job: a nice, safe position as third officer on some milk run, with a master's berth when he was fifty and compulsory retirement on a measured pension ten years later.

"Uh, the sun is more bright," he said. "You saw how our quarters were lit, Stepha."

"Damn near blinded me," the girl grumbled.

"You'd get used to that. You'd have to be careful at first anyway, going outdoors. The sun could burn your skin."

"The plague you say!" exploded one of Falkayn's guards.

The Hermetian decided he was giving a poor impression. "Only for a while," he stumbled. "Then you're safe. Your skin turns tough and brown."

"What?" Stepha raised a hand to her own clear cheek. Her mouth fell open.

"It must be hot there," said Ursala shrewdly.

"Not so much," Falkayn said. "Warmer than here, of course, in most places."

"How can you stand it?" Thorn asked. "I'm sweating right now."

"Well, in really hot weather you can go indoors. We can make a building as warm or cool as we please."

"D'you mean to say I'd have to just *sit,* till the weather made up its own confounded mind to change?" Thorn barked.

"I remember," Stepha put in. "The air you had was muggier'n a marsh. Earth like that?"

“Depends on where you are,” Falkayn said. “And actually, we control the weather cycle pretty well on Earth.”

“Worse and worse,” Thorn complained. “If I’m to sweat, I sure don’t want to do it at somebody else’s whim.” He brightened. “Unless you can fight them when you don’t like what they’re up to?”

“Good Lord, no!” Falkayn said. “Fighting is forbidden on Earth.”

Thorn slumped back against the rail and gaped at him. “But what am I going to do then?”

“Uh…well, you’ll have to go to school for a number of years. That’s Earth years, about five times as long as Ikranankan. You’ll have to learn, oh, mathematics and natural philosophy and history and—Now that I think about it, the total is staggering. Don’t worry, though. They’ll find you work, once you’ve finished your studies.”

“What sort of work?”

“M-m-m, couldn’t be too highly paid, I fear. Not even on a colony planet. The colonies aren’t primitive, you realize, and you need a long education to handle the machines we use. I suppose you could become a—” Falkayn groped for native words—“a cook or a machine tender’s helper or something.”

“Me, who ruled a city?” Thorn shook his head and mumbled to himself.

“You must have some fighting to do,” Stepha protested.

“Yes, unfortunately,” Falkayn said.

“Why ‘unfortunately’? You’re a strange one.” Stepha turned to Thorn. “Cheer up, Cap’n. We’ll be soldiers. If Great Granther didn’t lie, those places are stuffed with plunder.”

“Soldiers aren’t allowed to plunder,” Falkayn said. They looked positively shocked. “And anyway, they also need more skill with machines than I think you can acquire at your present ages.”

“Balls…of…fire,” Thorn whispered. “We’ve got to hold a phratry council about this,” said a guard in an alarmed voice.

Thorn straightened and took command of himself again. “That wouldn’t be easy right now,” he pointed out. “We’ll carry on as we were. When the siege is broken and we get back in touch with our people, we’ll see what we want to do. Ursala, you and I were going to organize that liaison corps between our two forces.”

“Yes, I suppose we must,” said the King reluctantly. He dipped his head to Falkayn. “Farewell. I trust we can talk later at length.” Thorn’s good-by was absentminded; he was in a dark brown study. They wandered off.

Stepha leaned her elbows on the rail. She wore quite a brief tunic, and her hair was unbound. A breeze fluttered the bronze locks. Though her expression had gone bleak, Falkayn remembered certain remarks she had let drop earlier. His pulse accelerated. Might as well enjoy his imprisonment.

“I didn’t mean to make Earth sound that bad,” he said. “You’d like it. A girl so good-looking, with so exotic a background—you’d be a sensation.”

She continued to stare at the watchtowers. The scorn in her voice dismayed him. “Sure, a novelty. For how long?”

“Well—My dear, to me you will always be a most delightful novelty.”

She didn’t respond. “What the deuce are you so gloomy about all of a sudden?” Falkayn asked.

Her lips compressed. “What you said. When you rescued me, I reckoned you for a big piece of man. Should’ve seen right off, nothing to that fracas, when you’d a monster to ride and a, a *machine* in your hand! And unfair, maybe, to call you a rotten zandaraman. You never were trained to ride. But truth, you are no good in the saddle. Are you good for anything, without a machine to help?”

“At least one thing,” he tried to grin.

She shrugged. “I’m not mad, David. Only dis’pointed. My fault, truth, for not seeing before now ’twas just your being different made you look so fine.”

My day, Falkayn groaned to himself.

“Reckon I’ll go see if Hugh’s off duty,” Stepha said. “You can look ’round some more if you want.”

Falkayn rubbed his chin as he stared after her. Beginning bristles scratched back. Naturally, this would be the time when his last dose of antibeard enzyme started to wear off. Outside the ship, there probably wasn’t a razor on all Ikrananka. He was in for days of itchiness, until the damned face fungus had properly sprouted.

The girl had not spoken without justification, he thought bitterly. He had indeed been more sinned against than sinning, this whole trip. If Chee Lan and Adzel had come to grief, the guilt was his; he was the captain. In another four months, if they hadn’t reported back, the travel plan they’d left at base would be unsealed and a rescue expedition dispatched. That might bail him out, assuming he was still alive. At the moment, he wasn’t sure he wanted to be.

A shout spun him around. He stared over the rail and the city wall. Thunder seemed to crash through his head.

Adzel!

The Wodenite came around the bend of the lower road at full gallop. Scales gleamed along the rippling length of him; he roared louder than the waterfall. A shriek lifted from the enemy camp. Drums rolled from Rangakora's towers. Men and Ikranankans swarmed beweaponed to the parapets.

"Demons alive!" gasped at Falkayn's back. He glanced, and saw his two guards goggling ashen-faced at the apparition. It flashed through him; a chance to escape. He slipped toward the door.

Stepha returned. She seized his arm and threw her weight against him. "Look aware!" she yelled. The men broke from their paralysis, drew blade, and herded him back. He felt sick.

"What's going on?" he choked. "Where's the spaceship?"

Now he could only watch. A Katandaran cavalry troop rallied and charged. Adzel didn't stop. He plowed on through. Lances splintered against his armor, riders spilled and zandaras fled in panic. He might have been halted by catapult fire. But the field artillery had not been briefed on extraplanetary beings, nor on what to do when an actual, visible demon made straight for them. They abandoned their posts.

Terror spread like hydrogen. Within minutes, Jadhadi's army was a howling, struggling mob, headed downhill for home. Adzel chased them awhile, to make sure they kept going. When the last infantry soldier had scuttled from view, the Wodenite came back, across a chaos of dropped weapons, plunging zandaras and karikuts, idle wagons, empty tents, smoldering fires. His tail wagged gleefully.

Up to the gates he trotted. Falkayn couldn't hear what he bellowed but could well imagine. The human's knees felt liquid. He struggled for air. No time seemed to pass before a messenger hastened out to say he was summoned. But the walk through hollow streets—Rangakora's civilian population had gone indoors to wail at the gods—and onto the parapet, took forever.

The walk calmed him somewhat, though. When he stood with Thorn, Ursala, Stepha, and a line of soldiers, looking down on his friend, he could again think. This close, he saw Chee's furry form on the great shoulders. At least they were both alive. Tears stung his eyes.

"David!" bawled Adzel. "I hoped so much you'd be here. Why don't they let me in?"

"I'm a prisoner," Falkayn called back in Latin.

"No, you don't," said Thorn. "Talk Anglic or Katandaran, that I can understand, or keep mouth shut."

Because the spearheads bristling around looked so infernally sharp, Falkayn obeyed. It added to the general unpleasantness of life that everybody should learn how his ship was immobilized. And now he really was stuck here. His gullet lumped up.

Thorn said eagerly: "Hoy, look, we've got common cause. Let's march on Haijakata together, get that flying thing of yours away from them, and then on to Katandara."

Ursala's tone grew wintry. "In other words, my city is to be ruled from there in spite of everything."

"We've got to help our brethren," Thorn said.

"I intercepted a courier on my way here," Adzel told them. "I am afraid I lost merit by frightening him, but we read his dispatches. The Ershoka who were in town but not in the Iron House assembled and attacked from the rear. Thus combined, their forces crumpled the siege lines and fought their way out of the city. They took over—what was the name now? a Chakoran village—and sent for outlying families to come and be safer. Jadhadi does not dare attack them with his available troops. He is calling for reinforcements from the various Imperial garrisons."

Thorn tugged his beard. "If I know my people," he said, "they'll march out before that can happen. And where would they march but to us?" His countenance blazed. "By Destruction! We need but sit, and we'll get everything I wanted!"

"Besides," Stepha warned, "we couldn't trust Falkayn. Soon's he got back that flying machine of his, he could do what he felt like." She gave the Hermetian a hostile look. "Reckon you'd bite on us."

"The one solitary thing I wish for is to get away from this planet," he argued. "Very far away."

"But afterward? Your stinking merchants interest does lie with Katandara. And could well be others like you, coming later on. No, best we keep you, my buck." She leaned over the battlements, cupped her hands, and shouted: "Go away, you, or we'll throw your friend's head at you!"

Chee stood up between the spinal plates. Her thin voice barely reached them through the cataracts boom: "If you do that, we'll pull your dungheap of a town down around your ears."

"Now, wait, wait," Ursala pleaded. "Let us be reasonable."

Thorn ran an eye along the faces crowding the wall. Sweat glistened and tongues moistened lips; beaks hung open and ruffs drooped. "We can't well sally against him," he said *sotto voce*. "Our people are too scared right now, and besides, most zandaras would bolt. But we can keep him at his distance. When the whole phratry arrives—yes, that'll be too many. We can wait."

"And keep me alive for a bargaining counter," said Falkayn quickly.

“Sure, sure,” Stepha sneered.

Thorn issued an order. Engineers began to wind catapult skeins. Adzel heard the creaking and drew back out of range. “Have courage, David!” he called. “We shall not abandon you.”

Which was well meant but not so useful, Falkayn reflected in a gray mood. Thorn not only desired to keep Rangakora, he had to, for the sake of his kinfolk. The Ershoka had been sufficiently infected by the chronic suspiciousness of Katandara that they’d never freely let Falkayn back on his ship. Rather, they’d make him a permanent hostage, against the arrival of other spacecraft. And once firmly established here, they’d doubtless try to overthrow the Deodakh hegemony. Might well succeed, too. The most Falkayn could hope for was that a rescue expedition could strike a bargain: in exchange for him, the League would stay off Ikrananka. The treaty would be observed, he knew; it didn’t pay to trade with a hostile population. And when he learned this market must not merely be shared, but abandoned, van Rijn would bounce Falkayn clear to Luna.

What a fine bouillabaisse he’d gotten himself into!

His guards hustled him off toward the palace apartment which was his jail. Adzel collected what few draft animals had not broken loose from their tethers, for a food supply, and settled down to his one-dragon siege of the city.

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Chee Lan had no trouble reaching the east wall unseen. The Katandarans hadn’t been close enough to trample the shrubs, nor had the Rangakorans gone out to prune and weed. There was plenty of tall growth to hide her approach. Crouched at the foot, she looked up a sheer dark cliff; a cloud scudded through the purple sky above and made it seem toppling on her. Pungent tarry smells of vegetation filled her nose. The wind blew cold. From the opposite side she heard the cataract roar.

Here in the shadow it was hard to make out details. But slowly she picked a route. As usual, the stones were not dressed except where they fitted together, and the rains and frosts of several thousand years had pitted them. She could climb.

Her sinews tautened. She sprang, grabbed finger-and toeholds, reached for the next and the next. Chill and rough, the surface scratched her belly. She was handicapped by her loot from the empty camp, two daggers at her waist and a rope coiled around her. Nonetheless, unemotionally, she climbed.

When her fingers grasped the edge of a crenel, she did hesitate a moment. Guards were posted at intervals here. But—She pulled herself over, hunched down between the merlons, and peeped out. Some meters to left and right she saw the nearest watchers. One was human, one Ikranankan. Their cloaks fluttered as wildly as the banners atop the more distant towers. But they were looking straight outward.

Quick, now! Chee darted across the parapet. As expected—any competent military engineer would have designed things thus—several meters of empty paving stretched between the inside foot of the wall and the nearest houses. With commerce to the outer world suspended, no traffic moved on it. She didn't stop to worry about chance passersby, but spidered herself down with reckless speed. The last few meters she dropped. Low gravity was helpful.

Once she had streaked into the nearest alley, she took a while to pant. No longer than she must, though. She could hear footfalls and croaking voices. Via a window frame, she got onto the roof of one house.

There she had a wide view. The bloated red sun slanted long rays over streets where gratifyingly few natives were abroad. Hours after Adzel's coming, they must still be too shaken to work. *Let's see…David's sure to be kept in the palace, which must be that pretentious object in the middle of town.* She plotted a path, roof to roof as much as possible, crossing the narrowest lanes when they were deserted, and started off.

Wariness cost time; but cheap at the price. The worst obstacle lay at the end. Four spacious avenues bordered the royal grounds, and they were far from deserted. Besides a trickle of workaday errands, they milled with anxious clusters of Ikranankans, very humanlike in seeking what comfort they could get from the near presence of their rulers. Chee spent a couple of hours behind a chimney, studying the scene, before a chance came by.

A heavy wagon was trundling down the street in front of her at the same time as an aged native in sweeping official robes was headed for the palace. Chee leaped down into the gut between this house and the next. She had counted on buildings being crowded. The karikuts clopped past, the wagon creaked and rumbled behind, its bulk screened her. She zipped underneath it and trotted along on all fours. At closest approach, she had about three meters to go to the Ikranankan gaffer. If she was noticed, the gardens were immediately beyond, with lots of hedges and bowers to skulk in. But she hoped that wouldn't be necessary.

It wasn't, since she crossed the open space in half a second flat. Twitching up the back of the old fellow's skirt, she dove beneath and let the cloth fall over her.

He stopped. “What? What?” she heard, and turned with him, careful not to brush against his shins. “Krrr-ek? What? Swear I felt…no, no…uk-k-k…” He shambled on. When she judged they were well into the grounds, Chee abandoned him for the nearest bush. Through the leaves she saw him stop again, feel his garments, scratch his head, and depart mumbling.

So far, so good. The next stage could really get merry. Chee prowled the garden for some while, hiding as only a forester can hide when anyone passed near, until the permutations of perambulation again offered her an opportunity.

She had worked her way around to a side of the palace. A stand of pseudobamboo veiled her from it, with a hedge at right angles for extra cover, and nobody was in sight: except a native guard, scrunching down the gravel path in breastplate and greaves. He ought to know. Chee let him go by and pounced. A flying tackle brought him onto his stomach with a distressing clatter. At once she was on his shoulders, left arm choking off his breath and right hand drawing a knife.

She laid the point against his throat and whispered cheerfully: “One squeak out of you, my friend, and you’re cold meat. I wouldn’t like that either. You can’t be very tasty.”

Slacking the pressure, she let him turn his head till he glimpsed her, and decided to pardon the gargle he emitted. It must be disturbing to be set on by a gray-masked demon, even a small one. “Quick, now, if you want to live,” she ordered. “Where is the prisoner Ershokh?”

“Ak-k-k—uk-k-k—”

“No stalling.” Chee pinked him. “You know who I mean. The tall yellow-haired beardless person. Tell me or die!”

“He—he is in—” Words failed. The soldier made a gallant attempt to rise. Chee throttled him momentarily insensible. She had taken care, while at Haijakata, to get as good a knowledge of Ikranankan anatomy as was possible without dissection. And this was a comparatively feeble species.

When the soldier recovered, he was quite prepared to cooperate. Or anyhow, he was too terrified to invent a lie; Chee had done enough interrogation in her time to be certain of that. She got exact directions for finding the suite. Two Ershoka watched it, but outside a solid bronze door.

“Thank you,” she said, and applied pressure again. Cutting some lengths of rope and a strip of his cloak for a gag, she immobilized her informant and rolled him in among the plumed stalks. He was regaining consciousness as she left. “You’ll be found before too long, I’m sure,” she said. “Probably before they water the garden.”

She slipped off. Now there was indeed need to hurry. And she couldn’t. Entering the capitol of this damned nightless city unnoticed made everything that had gone before look like tiddlywinks. An open window gave access to a room she had seen was empty. But then it was to get from tapestry to settee to ornamental urn to statue, while aleph-null servants and guards and bureaucrats and tradespeople and petitioners and sisters and cousins and aunts went back and forth through the long corridors; and take a ramp at the moment it was deserted, on the hope that no one would appear before she found her next hiding place; and on and on—By the time she reached the balcony she wanted, whose slender columns touched the eaves, even her nerves were drawn close to breaking.

She shinnied up, swung herself over the roof edge, and crawled to a point directly above a window that must belong to Falkayn’s apartment. Her prisoner had told her it was between the second and third north-side balconies. And two stories down, with a wall too smooth for climbing. But she had plenty of rope left, and plenty of chimneys poked from the tiles. She made a loop around the nearest. After a glance to be sure no one was gauping from the ground, she slid.

Checked, she peered in the window. An arabesque grille of age-greened bronze would let her pass, but not a man. Why hadn't she thought to search the Katandaran litter for a hacksaw? She reached through and rapped on the glass behind. There was no response. With a remark that really shouldn't have come out of such fluffy white fur, she broke the pane with a dagger butt and crept inside. While she looked around, she pulled in the rope.

The rooms were well furnished, if you were an Ikranankan. For a man they were dark and cold, and Falkayn lay asleep curled up like a hawser. Chee padded to the bed, covered his mouth—humans were so ridiculously emotional—and shook him.

He started awake. "Huh? Whuff, whoo, ugh!" Chee laid a finger on her muzzle. His eyes cleared, he nodded and she let him go.

"Chee!" he breathed shakenly. His hands closed around hers. "How the devil?"

"I sneaked in, you idiot. Did you expect me to hire a band? Now let's figure some way to get you out."

Falkayn gasped. "You mean you don't know?"

"How should I?"

He rose to his feet, but without vigor. "Me too," he said.

Chee's courage sank. She slumped down on the floor.

With a rush of love, Falkayn stooped, lifted her, and cradled her in his arms. "Just knowing you tried is enough," he murmured.

Her tail switched. The vinegar returned to her voice. “Not for me it isn’t.” After a moment: “All we need is an escape from here. Then we can wait in the outback for the relief expedition.”

Falkayn shook his head. “Sorry, no. How’d we get in touch? They’d spot *Muddlin’ Through,* sure, but as soon as we reached that area, we’d be filled with ironmongery, so Jadhadi could throw the blame for our disappearance on Thorn. He’d probably get away with it, too. Think how these natives would stick together in the face of an alien.”

Chee reflected awhile. “I could try to slip within voice range of our ship’s detectors.”

“M-m-m.” Falkayn ran a hand through his hair. “You know you’d never manage that, as witness the fact you didn’t try in the first place. No cover worth itemizing.” Rage welled in him. “Damn that chance that Adzel’s transceiver got smashed! If we could have called the ship—”

And then his mind rocked. He stumbled back and sat down on the bed. Chee jumped clear and watched with round yellow eyes. The silence grew huge.

Until Falkayn smashed fist into palm and said, “Judas on Mercury! Yes!”

The discipline of his boyhood came back. He’d been drugged and kidnapped and given one figurative belly kick after another, and been unable to do a thing about it, and that had shattered him. Now, as the idea took shape, he knew he was a man yet. The possibility that he would get killed mattered not a hoot in a vacuum. Under the thrumming consciousness, his soul laughed for joy.

“Listen,” he said. “You could get out of town again, even if I can’t. But your chance of surviving very long, and Adzel’s, wouldn’t be worth much.

Your chance of being rescued would be still smaller. If you're willing to throw the dice right now—go for broke—then—"

Chee did not argue with his plan. She pondered, made a few calculations in her head, and nodded. "Let us."

Falkayn started to put on his clothes but paused. "Wouldn't you like a nap first?"

"No, I feel quite ready. Yourself?"

Falkayn grinned. His latest sleep had restored him. The blood tingled in his flesh. "Ready to fight elephants, my friend."

Dressed, he went to the door and pounded on it. "Hey!" he shouted. "Help! Emergency! Urgency! Top secret! Priority One! Handle with care! Open this door, you scratchbrains!"

A key clicked in the lock. The door swung wide. A large Ershokh stood in the entrance with drawn sword. His companion waited a discreet distance behind. "Well?"

"I've got to see your boss," Falkayn babbled. Anything to get within arm's length. He stepped closer, waving his hands. "I've thought of something terrible."

"What?" growled from the beard.

"This." Falkayn snatched at the man's cloak, on either side of the brooch, with wrists crossed. He pulled his hands together. The backs of them closed on his victim's larynx. Simultaneously, Chee hurtled into the hall and over the clothes of the other guard.

Falkayn's man slashed downward with his saber, but Falkayn's leg wasn't there any more. That knee had gone straight up. The soldier doubled in anguish. Then strangulation took him. Falkayn let him fall and bounded to the next Ershokh. Chee swarmed on that one, and had so far kept him from uttering more than a few snorts and grunts, but she couldn't overpower him. Falkayn chopped with the blade of a hand. The guard collapsed.

He wasn't badly injured either, Falkayn saw with some relief. He stooped, to drag them both inside and don a uniform. But there had been too much ruckus. A female Ikranankan stuck her head out of an entrance further down the hall and began to scream. Well, you couldn't have everything. Falkayn grabbed a saber and sped off. Chee loped beside him. The screams hit high C and piled on the decibels.

Down yonder ramp! A courtier was headed up. Falkayn stiff-armed him and continued. Several more were in the corridor below. He waved his sword. "Blood and bones!" he yelled. "Boo!" They cleared a path, falling over each other and clamoring.

And here was the electrical shop. Falkayn stormed in. Across workbenches crammed with quaintly designed apparatus, two scientists and several assistants gaped at him. "Everybody out," Falkayn said. When they didn't move fast enough, he paddled the Grand Chief Philosopher of Royal Rangakora with the flat of his blade. They got the message. He slammed the door and shot the bolt.

The uproar came through that heavy metal, louder by the minutes, voices, feet, weapon clatter, and alarm drums. He glanced around. The windows gave no access, but another door opened at the far end of the long room. He bolted that, too, and busied himself shoving furniture against it. If he piled everything there that wasn't nailed down and used Chee's rope to secure the mass further, he could probably make it impassable to anyone short of the army engineers. And they wouldn't likely be called, when the other approach looked easier.

He ended his task and returned, breathing hard. Chee had also been busy. She squatted on the floor amid an incredible clutter of batteries and assorted junk, coiling a wire into a helix while she frowned at a condenser jar. She could do no more than guess at capacitances, resistances, inductances, voltages, and amperages. However, the guess would be highly educated.

Both doors trembled under fists and boots. Falkayn watched the one he had not reinforced. He stretched, rocked a little on his feet, willed the tension out of his muscles. Behind him, Chee fiddled with a spark gap; he heard the slight frying noise.

A human voice bawled muffled: “Clear the way! Clear the way! We’ll break the obscenity thing down, if you’ll get but of our obscenity way!” Chee didn’t bother to look from her work.

The racket outside died. After a breathless moment, feet pounded and a weight smashed at the bronze. It rang and buckled. Again the ram struck. This time a sound of splintering was followed by hearty curses. Falkayn grinned. They must have used a balk of glued-together timber, which had proved less than satisfactory. He went to a gap where the door had been bent a little clear of the jamb and had a look. Several Ershoka could be seen, in full canonicals, fury alive on their faces. “Peekaboo,” Falkayn said.

“Get a smith!” He thought he recognized Hugh Padrick’s cry. “You, there, get an obscenity smith. And hammers and cold chisels.”

That would do the job, but time would be needed. Falkayn returned to help Chee. “Think we’ve got ample juice in those batteries?” he asked.

“Oh yes.” She kept eyes at the single workbench not manning the barricade, where she improvised a telegraph key out of scrap metal. “Only four hundred kilometers or so, right? Even that slue-footed Adzel made it in a few standard days. What worries me is getting the right frequency.”

“Well, estimate as close as you can, and then use different values. You know, make a variable contact along a wire.”

“Of course I know! Didn’t we plan this in your rooms? Stop yattering and get useful.”

“I’m more the handsome type,” said Falkayn. He wielded a pair of pliers awkwardly—they weren’t meant for a human grasp—to hook the batteries in series. And a Leyden jar, though you really should call it a Rangakora jar…

The door belled and shuddered. Falkayn kept half his mind in that direction. Probably somewhat less than an hour had passed since he crashed out. Not a hell of a lot of time to play Heinrich Hertz. But Chee had put on the last touches. She squatted before the ungainly sprawl of apparatus, tapped her key, and nodded. A spark sizzled across a gap. She went into a rattle of League code. Invisible, impalpable, the radio waves surged forth.

Now everything depended on her finding the waveband of the late lamented transceivers, somewhere among those she could blindly try. She hadn’t long, either. The door would give way in another minute or two. Falkayn left her for his post.

The bolt sprang loose. The door sagged open. An Ershokh pushed in, sword a-shimmer.

Falkayn crossed blades. Steel chimed. As expected, the man was a sucker for scientific fencing. Falkayn could have killed him in thirty seconds. But he didn’t want to. Besides, while he held this chap in the doorway, no Others could get past. “Having fun?” he called across the whirring edges. Rage snarled back at him.

Dit-dit-dah-dit…Come to Rangakora. Land fifty meters outside the south gate. Dit-dah-dah. Clash, rattle, clang!

The Ershokh got his back to the jamb. Abruptly he sidled past the entrance, and another man was there. Falkayn held the first one by sheer energy while his foot lashed out in an epical savate kick. The second man yelped agony and lurched back into the arms of his fellows. Whirling, Falkayn deflected the blade of the first one with a quick beat and followed with a glide. His point sank into the forearm. He twisted deftly, ripping through tissue, and heard the enemy saber clank on the floor.

Not stopping to pull his own weapon free, he turned and barely avoided the slash of a third warrior. He took one step forward and grabbed, karatestyle. A tug—a rather dreadful snapping noise—the Ershokh went to his knees, gray-faced and broken-armed, and Falkayn had his blade. It rang on the next.

The Hermetian's eyes flicked from side to side. The man he had cut was hunched over. Blood spurted from his wound, an impossibly brilliant red. The other casualty sat slumped against the wall. Falkayn looked into the visage that confronted him (a downy-cheeked kid, as he'd been himself not so long ago) and said, "If you'll hold off a bit, these busters can crawl out and get help."

The boy cursed and hacked at him. He caught the sword with his own in a bind and held fast. "Do you want your chum to bleed to death?" he asked. "Relax. I won't bite you. I'm really quite peaceful as long as you feed me."

He disengaged and poised on guard. The boy stared at him an instant, then backed off, into the crowd of humans and Ikranankans that eddied in the corridor behind him. Falkayn nudged the hurt men with a foot. “Go on,” he said gently. They crept past him, into a descending hush.

Hugh Padrick trod to the forefront. His blade was out, but held low. His features worked. “What’re you about?” he rasped.

“Very terrible magic,” Falkayn told him. “We’ll save trouble all around if you surrender right now.”

Dit-dah-dah-dah!

“What do you want of us?” Padrick asked.

“Well, to start with, a long drink. After that we can talk.” Falkayn tried to moisten his lips, without great success. Damn this air! No wonder the natives didn’t go in for rugs. Life would become one long series of static shocks. Maybe that was what had first gotten the Rangakorans interested in electricity.

“We might talk, yes.” Padrick’s saber drooped further. Then in a blinding split second it hewed at Falkayn’s calf.

The Hermetian’s trained body reacted before his mind had quite engaged gears. He leaped straight up, under two-thirds of a Terrestrial gee. The whetted metal hissed beneath his boot soles. He came down before it could withdraw. His weight tore the weapon from Padrick’s grasp. “Naughty!” he cried. His left fist rocketed forward. Padrick went on his bottom, nose a red ruin. Falkayn made a mental note that he be charged through that same nose for plastic surgery, if and when van Rijn’s factors got around to offering such services.

An Ikranankan poked a spear at him. He batted it aside and took it away. That gained him a minute.

He got another while Padrick reeled erect and vanished in the mob. And still another passed while they stared and shuffled their feet. Then he heard Bobert Thorn trumpet, “Clear the way! Crossbows!”—and knew that the end was on hand.

The crowd parted, right and left, out of his view. Half a dozen Ikranankan archers tramped into sight and took their stance before him, across the hall. But he put on the most daredevil grin in his repertory when Stepha ran ahead of them.

She stopped and regarded him with wonder. “David,” she breathed. “No other man in the world could’ve—And I never knew.”

“You do now.” Since her dagger was sheathed, he risked chucking her under the chin. “They teach us more where I’ve been than how to handle machines. Not that I’d mind a nice safe armored vehicle.”

Tears blurred the gray eyes. “You’ve got to give up, though,” she begged. “What more can anyone do?”

“This,” he said, dropped his saber and grabbed her. She yelled and fought back with considerable strength, but his was greater. He pinioned her in front of him and said to the archers, “Go away, you ugly people.” The scent of her hair was warm in his nostrils.

Imperturbably, Chee continued to signal.

Stepha stopped squirming. He felt her stiffen in his grip. She said with an iron pride, “No, go ’head and shoot.”

“You don’t mean that!” he stammered.

“Sure do.” She gave him a forlorn smile. “Think an Ershokh’s less ready to die than you are?”

The archers took aim.

Falkayn shook his head. “Well,” he said, and even achieved a laugh, “when the stakes are high, people bluff.” A howl, a babble, distant but rising and nearing, didn't seem very important. "Of course I wouldn't've used you for a shield. I'm an awful liar, and you have better uses." He kissed her. She responded. Her hands moved over his back and around his neck.

Which was fun, and moreover gained a few extra seconds…

"The demon, the demon!" Men and Ikranankans pelted by. A thunderclap was followed by the sound of falling masonry.

Stepha didn't join the stampede. But she pulled free, and the dagger flashed into her hand. "What's that?" she cried.

Falkayn gusted the air from his lungs. His head swam. Somehow he kept his tone level. "That," he said, "was our ship. She landed and took Adzel on for a pilot, and now he's aloft, losing merit but having a ball with a mild demonstration of strength." He took her hand. "Come on, let's go out where he can see us and get taken aboard. I'm overdue for a dry martini."

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The conference was held on neutral ground, an autonomous Chakoran village between the regions claimed of old by Katandara and Rangakora. (Autonomy meant that it paid tribute to both of them.) Being careful to observe every possible formality and not hurt one party's feelings more than another's, Falkayn let its head preside at the opening ceremonies. They were interminable. His eyes must needs wander, around the reddish gloom of the council hut, over the patterns of the woven walls, across the local males who squatted with their spears as a sort of honor guard, and back to the large stone table at which the conference was benched. He wished he could be outside. A cheerful bustle and chatter drifted to him through the open door, where Adzel lay so patiently; the soldiers who had escorted their various chiefs here were fraternizing.

You couldn't say that for the chiefs themselves. King Ursala had finished droning through a long list of his grievances and desires, and now fidgeted while Emperor Jadhadi embarked on his own. Harry Smit glared at Bobert Thorn, who glared back. The Ershoka senior still blamed his phratry's troubles on the rebellion. His honor the mayor of this town rustled papers, doubtless preparing an introduction to the next harangue.

Well, Falkayn thought, *this was your idea, lad. And your turn has got to come sometime.*

When the spaceship hovered low above them and a giant's voice boomed forth, suggesting a general armistice and treaty-making, the factions had agreed. They didn't know they had a choice. Falkayn would never have fired on them, but he saw no reason to tell them that. No doubt Chee Lan, seated before the pilot board in the sky overhead, had more to do now with keeping matters orderly than Adzel's overwhelming presence. But why did they have to make these speeches? The issues were simple. Jadhadi wanted Rangakora and felt he could no longer trust the Ershoka. A large number of the Ershoka wanted Rangakora, too; the rest wished for the status quo ante, or a reasonable substitute, but didn't see how to get it; each group felt betrayed by the other. Ursala wanted all foreign devils out of his town, plus a whopping indemnity for damages suffered. And Falkayn wanted—well, he'd tell them. He lit his pipe and consoled himself with thoughts of Stepha, who awaited him in the village. Quite a girl, that, for recreation if not for a lifetime partner.

An hour passed.

"—the distinguished representative of the merchant adventurers from Beyond-the-World, Da'id 'Alkayn."

His boredom evaporated. He rose to his feet in a tide of eagerness that he could barely mask with a smile and a casual drawl.

"Thank you, most noble," he said. "After listening to these magnificent orations, I won't even try to match them. I'll state my position in a few simple words." That should win him universal gratitude!

"We came here in good faith," he said, "offering to sell you goods such as I have demonstrated at unbelievably reasonable prices. What happened? We were assaulted with murderous intent. I myself was imprisoned and humiliated. Our property was illegally sequestered. And frankly, most nobles, you can be plaguey thankful none of us was killed." He touched his blaster. "Remember, we do represent a great power, which has a fixed policy of avenging harm done to its people." *When expedient,* he added, and saw how Jadhadi's ruff rose with terror and Smit's knuckles stood white on his fist.

"Relax, relax," he urged. "We're in no unfriendly mood. Besides, we want to trade, and you can't trade during a war. That's one reason I asked for this get-together. If the differences between us can be settled, why, that's to the League's advantage. And to yours, too. You do want what we have to sell, don't you?

"So." He leaned forward, resting his fingertips on the table. "I think a compromise is possible. Everybody will give up something, and get something, and as soon as trade starts you'll be so wealthy that what you lost today will make you laugh. Here's a rough outline of the general agreement I shall propose.

“First, Rangakora will be guaranteed complete independence, but drop claims to indemnification—”

“Most noble!” Jadhadi and Ursala sprang up and yelled into each other’s beaks.

Falkayn waved them to silence. “I yield for a question to King Ursala,” he said, or the equivalent thereof.

“Our casualties…crops ruined…dependent villages looted…buildings destroyed—” Ursala stopped, collected himself, and said with more dignity: “We were not the aggressors.”

“I know,” Falkayn said, “and I sympathize. However, weren’t you prepared to fight for your freedom? Which you now have. That should be worth something. Don’t forget, the League will be a party to any treaty we arrive at here. If that treaty guarantees your independence, the League will back the guarantee.” *Not strictly true. Only Solar Spice & Liquors is to be involved. Oh, well, makes no practical difference.* He nodded at Jadhadi. “By my standards, most noble, you should pay for the harm you did. I’m passing that in the interests of reconciliation.”

“But my borders,” the Emperor protested. “I must have strong borders. Besides, I have a rightful claim to Rangakora. My great ancestor, the first Jadhadi—”

Falkayn heroically refrained from telling him what to do to his great ancestor and merely answered in his stiffest voice: “Most noble, please consider yourself let off very lightly. You did endanger the lives of League agents. You cannot expect the League not to exact some penalty. Yielding Rangakora is mild indeed.” He glanced at his blaster, and Jadhadi shivered. “As for your border defenses,” Falkayn said, “the League can help you there. Not to mention the fact that we will sell you firearms. You won't need your Ershoka any more."

Jadhadi sat down. One could almost see the wheels turning in his head.

Falkayn looked at Thorn, who was sputtering. "The loss of Rangakora is your penalty, too," he said. "Your followers did seize me, you know."

"But what shall we do?" cried old Harry Smit. "Where shall we go?"

"Earth?" Thorn growled. Falkayn had been laying it on thick of late, how alien Earth was to these castaways. They weren't interested in repatriation any more. He didn't feel guilty about that. They would in fact be happier here, where they had been born. And if they were staying of their own free choice, van Rijn's traders could be trusted to keep silence. In the course of the next generation or two—the secret wouldn't last longer in any event—their children and grandchildren could gradually be integrated into galactic civilization, much as Adzel's had been.

"No, if you don't want to," Falkayn said. "But what has your occupation been? Soldiering. Some of you keep farms, ranches, or town houses. No reason why you can't continue to do so; foreigners have often owned property in another country. Because what you should do is establish a nation in your own right. Not in any particular territory. Everything hereabouts is already claimed. But you can be an itinerant people. There are precedents, like nomads and Gypsies on ancient Earth. Or, more to the point, there are those nations on Cynthia which are trade routes rather than areas. My friend Chee Lan can explain the details of organization to you. As for work—well, you are warriors, and the planet is full of barbarians, and once the League gets started here there are going to be more caravans to protect than fighters to protect them. You can command high prices for your service. You'll get rich."

He beamed at the assembly. "In fact, we'll all get rich."

"Missionaries," said Adzel into the pensive silence.

"Uh, yes, I'd forgotten," Falkayn said. "I don't imagine anyone will object if the ships bring an occasional teacher? We would like to explain our beliefs to you."

The point looked so minor that no one argued. Yet it would bring more changes in the long run than machinery or medicine. The Katandarans would surely leap at Buddhism, which was infinitely more comfortable than their own demonology. Together with what scientific knowledge trickled down to them, the religion would wean them from their hostility complex. Result: a stable culture with which Nicholas van Rijn could do business.

Falkayn spread his hands. "That's the gist of my suggestions," he finished. "What I propose is what an Earthman once called an equality of dissatisfaction. After which the League traders will bring more satisfactions to you than you can now imagine."

Thorn bit his lip. He wouldn't easily abandon his dream of kingship. "Suppose we refuse?" he said.

"Well," Falkayn reminded him, "the League has been offended. We must insist on some retribution. My demands are nominal. Aren't they?"

He had them, he knew. The carrot of trade and the stick of war; they didn't know the war threat was pure bluff. They'd make the settlement he wanted.

But of course they'd do so with endless bargaining, recrimination, quibbles over details, speeches—oh, God, the speeches! Falkayn stepped back. "I realize this is a lot to swallow at once," he said. "Why don't we recess? After everyone's had time to think, and had a good sleep, we can talk to more purpose."

Mainly, he wanted to get back to Stepha. He'd promised her a jaunt in the spaceship; and Adzel and Chee could jolly well wait right here. When the assembly agreed to break, Falkayn was the first one out the door.

Metal hummed. The viewport blazed with stars in an infinite night. That red spark which was Ikrananka's sun dwindled swiftly toward invisibility.

Staring yonder, Falkayn sighed. "A whole world," he mused. "So many lives and hopes. Seems wrong for us to turn them over to somebody else."

"I know why you would go back," Chee Lan clipped. "But Adzel and I have no such reason. We've a long way to Earth—"

Falkayn brightened. He had analogous motives for looking forward to journey's end.

"—so move your lazy legs," Chee said.

Falkayn accompanied her to the saloon. Adzel was already there, arranging chips in neat stacks. "You know," Falkayn remarked as he sat down, "we're a new breed. Not troubleshooters. Trouble twisters. I suspect our whole career is going to be a sequence of ghastly situations that somehow we twist around to our advantage."

"Shut up and shuffle," Chee said. "First jack deals."

A pair of uninteresting hands went by, and then Falkayn got a flush. He bet. Adzel folded. Chee saw him. The computer raised. Falkayn raised back. Chee quit and the computer raised again. This went on for some time before the draw. Muddlehead must have a good hand,

Falkayn knew, but considering its style of play, a flush was worth staying on. He stood pat. The computer asked for one card.

Judas in a nova burst! The damned machine must have gotten four of a kind! Falkayn tossed down his own. “Never mind,” he said. “Take it.”

Somewhat later, Chee had a similar experience, still more expensive. She made remarks that ionized the air.

Adzel’s turn came when the other two beings dropped out. Back and forth the raises went, between dragon and computer, until he finally got nervous and called.

“You win,” said the mechanical voice. Adzel dropped his full house, along with his jaw.

“What?” Chee screamed. Her tail stood vertical and bottled. “You were bluffing?”

“Yes,” said Muddlehead.

“But, no, wait, you play on IOU’s and we limit you,” Falkayn rattled. “You can’t bluff!”

“If you will inspect the No. 4 hold,” said Muddlehead, “you will find a considerable amount of furs, jewels, and spices. While the value cannot be set exactly until the market involved has stabilized, it is obviously large. I got them in exchange for calculating probability tables for the native Gujgengi, and am now prepared to purchase chips in the normal manner.”

“But, but, but you’re a machine!”

“I am not programmed to predict how a court would adjudicate title to those articles,” said Muddlehead. “However, my understanding is that in a commercially and individualistically oriented civilization, any legitimate earnings belong to the earner.”

“Good Lord,” said Falkayn weakly, “I think you’re right.”

"You're not a person!" Chee shouted. "Not even in fact, let alone the law!"

"I acquired those goods in pursuit of the objective you have programmed into me," Muddlehead replied, "namely, to play poker. Logic indicates that I can play better poker when properly staked."

Adzel sighed. "That's right, too," he conceded. "If we want the ship to give us an honest game, we have to take the syllogistic consequences. Otherwise the programming would become impossibly complicated. Besides…sportsmanship, you know."

Chee riffled the deck. "All right," she said grimly. "I'll win your stake the hard way."

Of course she didn't. Nobody did. With that much wealth at its disposal, Muddlehead could afford to play big. It didn't rake in their entire commissions for Operation Ikrananka in the course of the Earthward voyage, but it made a substantial dent in them.

HONORABLE ENEMIES

-1-

The door swung open behind him and a voice murmured gently: “Good evening, Captain Flandry.”

He spun around, grabbing for his stun pistol in a wild reflex, and found himself looking down the muzzle of a blaster. Slowly, then, he let his hands fall and stood taut, his eyes searching beyond the weapon, and the slender six-fingered hand that held it, to the tall gaunt body and the sardonically smiling face behind.

The face was humanoid—lean, hawk-nosed, golden-skinned, with brilliant amber eyes under feathery blue brows, and a high crest of shining blue feathers rising from the narrow hairless skull. The being was dressed in the simple white tunic of his people, leaving his clawed avian feet bare, but insignia of rank hung bejeweled around his neck and a cloak like a gush of blood from his wide shoulders.

But they’d all been occupied elsewhere—Flandry had seen to that. What had slipped up—?

With an effort, Flandry relaxed and let a wry smile cross his face. Never mind who was to blame; he was trapped in the Merseian chambers and had to think of a way to escape with a whole skin. His mind whirred with thought. Memory came—this was Aycharaych of Chereion, who had come to join the Merseian embassy only a few days before, presumably on some mission corresponding to Flandry's.

"Pardon the intrusion," he said, "it was purely professional. No offense meant."

"And none taken," said Aycharaych politely. He spoke faultless Anglic, only the faintest hint of his race's harsh accent in the syllables. But courtesy between spies was meaningless. It would be too easy to blast down the intruder and later express his immense regret that he had shot down the ace intelligence officer of the Terrestrial Empire under the mistaken impression that it was a burglar.

Somehow, though, Flandry didn't think that the Chereionite would be guilty of such crudeness. His mysterious people were too old, too coldly civilized, and Aycharaych himself had too great a reputation for subtlety. Flandry had heard of him before; he would be planning something worse.

"That is quite correct," nodded Aycharaych. Flandry started—could the being guess his exact thoughts?

"But if you will pardon my saying so, you yourself have committed a bit of clumsiness in trying to search our quarters. There are better ways of getting information."

Flandry gauged distances and angles. A vase on a table stood close to hand. If he could grab it up and throw it at Aycharaych's gun hand—

The blaster waved negligently. "I would advise against the attempt," said the Chereionite.

He stood aside. "Good evening, Captain Flandry," he said.

The Terran moved toward the door. He couldn't let himself be thrown out this way, not when his whole mission depended on finding out what the Merseians were up to. If he could make a sudden lunge as he passed close—

He threw himself sideways with a twisting motion that brought him under the blaster muzzle. Hampered by a greater gravity than the folk of his small planet were used to, Aycharaych couldn't dodge quickly enough. But he swung the blaster with a vicious precision across Flandry's jaw. The Terran stumbled, clasping the Chereionite's narrow waist. Aycharaych slugged him at the base of the skull and he fell to the floor.

He lay there a moment, gasping, blood running from his face. Aycharaych's voice jeered at him from a roaring darkness: "Really, Captain Flandry, I had thought better of you. Now please leave."

Sickly, the Terran crawled to his feet and went out the door.

Aycharaych stood in the entrance watching him go, a faint smile on his hard, gaunt visage.

Flandry went down endless corridors of polished stone to the suite given the Terrestrial mission. Most of them were at the feast; the ornate rooms stood almost empty. He threw himself into a chair and signaled his personal slave for a drink. A stiff one.

There was a light step and the suggestive whisper of a long silkite skirt behind him. He looked around and saw Aline Chang-Lei, the Lady Marr of Syrtis, his partner on the mission and one of Sol's top field agents for intelligence.

She was tall and slender, dark of hair and eye, with the high cheekbones and ivory skin of a mixed heritage such as most Terrans showed these days; her sea-blue gown did little more than emphasize the appropriate features.

Flandry liked to look at her, though he was pretty well immune to beautiful women by now.

“What was the trouble?” she asked at once.

“What brings you here?” he responded. “I thought you’d be at the party, helping distract everyone.”

“I just wanted to rest for a while,” she said. “Official functions at Sol get awfully dull and stuffy, but they go to the other extreme at Betelgeuse. I wanted to hear silence for a while.” And then, with grave concern: “But you ran into trouble.”

“How the hell it happened, I can’t imagine,” said Flandry. “Look—we prevailed on the Sartaz to throw a brawl with everybody invited. We made double sure that every Merseian on the planet would be there. They’d trust to their robolocks to keep their quarters safe—they have absolutely no way of knowing that I’ve found a way to nullify a robolock. So what happens? I no sooner get inside than Aycharaych of Chereion walks in with a blaster in his hot little hand. He anticipates everything I try and finally shows me the door. *Finis.*”

“Aycharaych—I’ve heard the name somewhere. But it doesn’t sound Merseian.”

“It isn’t. Chereion is an obscure but very old planet in the Merseian Empire. Its people have full citizenship with the dominant race, just as our empire grants Terrestrial citizenship to many nonhumans. Aycharaych is one of Merseia’s leading intelligence agents. Few people have heard of him, precisely because he is so good. I’ve never clashed with him before, though.”

“I know whom you mean now,” she nodded. “If he’s as you say, and he’s here on Alfzar, it isn’t good news.”

Flandry shrugged. “We’ll just have to take him into account, then. As if this mission weren’t tough enough!”

He got up and walked to the balcony window. The two moons of Alfzar were up, pouring coppery light on the broad reach of the palace gardens. The warm wind blew in with scent of strange flowers that had never bloomed under Sol and they caught the faint sound of the weird, tuneless music which the monarch of Betelgeuse favored.

For a moment, as he looked at the ruddy moonlight and the thronging stars, Flandry felt a wave of discouragement. The Galaxy was too big. Even the four million stars of the Terrestrial Empire were too many for one man ever to know in a lifetime. And there were the rival imperia out in the darkness of space, Gorrazan and Ythri and Merseia, like a hungry beast of prey—Too much, too much. The individual counted for too little in the enormous chaos which was modern civilization. He thought of Aline—it was her business to know who such beings as Aycharaych were, but one human skull couldn’t hold a universe; knowledge and power were lacking.

Too many mutually alien races; too many forces clashing in space, and so desperately few who comprehended the situation and tried their feeble best to help—naked hands battering at an avalanche as it ground down on them.

Aline came over and took his arm. Her face turned up to his, vague in the moonlight, with a look he knew too well. He’d have to avoid her, when or if they got back to Terra; he didn’t want to hurt her but neither could he be tied to any single human.

“You’re discouraged with one failure?” she asked lightly. “Dominic Flandry, the single-handed conqueror of Scothania, worried by one skinny bird-being?”

“I just don’t see how he knew I was going to search his place,” muttered Flandry. “I’ve never been caught that way before, not even when I was the worst cub in the Service. Some of our best men have gone down before Aycharaych. I’m convinced MacMurtrie’s disappearance at Polaris was his work. Maybe it’s our turn now.”

“Oh, come off it,” she laughed. “You must have been drinking *sorgan* when they told you about him.”

“Sorgan?” His brows lifted.

“Ah, now I can tell you something you don’t know.” She was trying desperately hard to be gay. “Not that it’s very important; I only happened to hear of it while talking with one of the Alfzarian narcotics detail. It’s a drug produced on one of the planets here—Cingetor, I think—with the curious property of depressing certain brain centers such that the victim loses all critical sense. He has absolute faith in whatever he’s told.”

“Hm. Could be useful in our line of work.”

“Not very. Hypnoprobes are better for interrogation, and there are more reliable ways of producing fanatics. The drug has an antidote which also confers permanent immunity. So it’s not much use, really, and the Sartaz has suppressed its manufacture.”

“I should think our Intelligence would like to keep a little on hand, just in case,” he said thoughtfully. “And of course certain nobles in all the empires, ours included, would find it handy for purposes of seduction.”

“What *are* you thinking of?” she teased him.

“Nothing; I don’t need it,” he said smugly.

The digression had shaken him out of his dark mood. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go join the party.”

She went along at his side. There was a speculative look about her.

-2-

Usually the giant stars have many planets, and Betelgeuse, with fortyseven, is no exception. Of these, six have intelligent native races, and the combined resources of the whole system are considerable, even in a civilization used to thinking in terms of thousands of stars.

When the first Terrestrial explorers arrived, almost a thousand years previously, they found that the people of Alfzar had already mastered interplanetary travel and were in the process of conquering the other worlds—a process speeded up by their rapid adoption of the more advanced human technology. However, they had not attempted to establish an empire on the scale of Sol or Merseia, contenting themselves with maintaining hegemony over enough neighbor suns to protect their home. There had been clashes with the expanding powers around them, but generations of wily Sartazes had found it profitable to play their potential enemies off against each other, and the great states had, in turn, found it expedient to maintain Betelgeuse as a buffer against their rivals and against the peripheral barbarians.

But the gathering tension between Terra and Merseia had raised Betelgeuse to a position of critical importance. Lying squarely between the two great empires, she was in a position with her powerful fleet to command the most direct route between them and, if allied with either one, to strike at the heart of the other. If Merseia could get the alliance, it would very probably be the last preparation she considered necessary for war with Terra. If Terra could get it, Merseia would suddenly be in a deteriorated position and would almost have to make concessions.

So both empires had missions on Alfzar trying to persuade the Sartaz of the rightness of their respective causes and the immense profits to be had by joining. Pressure was being applied wherever possible; officials were lavishly bribed; spies were swarming through the system getting whatever information they could and—of course—being immediately disowned by their governments if they were caught.

It was normal diplomatic procedure, but its critical importance had made the Service send two of its best agents, Flandry and Aline, to Betelgeuse to do what they could in persuading the Sartaz, finding out his weaknesses, and throwing as many monkey wrenches as possible into the Merseian activities. Aline was especially useful in working on the many humans who had settled in the system long before and become citizens of the kingdom; quite a few of them held important positions in the government and the military. Flandry—

And now, it seemed, Merseia had called in *her* top spy, and the subtle, polite, and utterly deadly battle was on.

The Sartaz gave a hunting party for his distinguished guests. It pleased his sardonic temperament to bring enemies together under conditions where they had to be friendly to each other. Most of the Merseians must have been pleased, too; hunting was their favorite sport. The more citified Terrestrials were not at all happy about it, but they could hardly refuse.

Flandry was especially disgruntled at the prospect. He had never cared for physical exertion, though he kept in trim as a matter of necessity. And he had too much else to do.

Too many things were going disastrously wrong. The network of agents, both Imperial and bribed Betelgeusean—who ultimately were under his command—were finding the going suddenly rugged. One after another, they disappeared; they walked into Merseian or Betelgeusean traps; they found their best approaches blocked by unexpected watchfulness. Flandry couldn't locate the source of the difficulty, but since it had begun with Aycharaych's arrival, he could guess. The Chereionite was too damned smart to be true. Sunblaze, it just wasn't possible that anyone could have known about those Jurovian projects, or that Yamatsu's hiding place should have been discovered, or—And now this damned hunting party! Flandry groaned.

His slave roused him in the dawn. Mist, tinged with blood by the red sun, drifted through the high windows of his suite. Someone was blowing a horn somewhere, a wild call in the vague mysterious light, and he heard the growl of engines warming up.

"Sometimes," he muttered sourly, "I feel like going to the Emperor and telling him where to put our beloved Empire."

Breakfast made the universe slightly more tolerable. Flandry dressed with his usual finicky care in an ornate suit of skintight green and a golden cloak with hood and goggles, hung a needle gun and dueling sword at his waist, and let the slave trim his reddish-brown mustache to the micrometric precision he demanded. Then he went down long flights of marble stairs, past royal guards in helmet and corselet, to the courtyard.

The hunting party was gathering. The Sartaz himself was present, a typical Alfzarian humanoid—short, stocky, hairless, blue-skinned, with huge yellow eyes in the round, blunt-faced head. Other nobles of Alfzar and its fellow planets were present, more guardsmen, a riot of color in the brightening dawn. There were the members of the regular Terrestrial embassy and the special mission, a harried and unhappy looking crew. And there were the Merseians.

Flandry gave them all formal greetings. After all, Terra and Merseia were nominally at peace, however many men were being shot and cities burning on the marches. His gray eyes looked sleepy and indifferent but they missed no detail of the enemy's appearance.

The Merseian nobles glanced at him with the thinly covered contempt they had for all humans. They were mammals, but with more traces of reptilian ancestry in them than Terrans showed. A huge-thewed two meters they stood, with a spiny ridge running from forehead to the end of the long, thick tail which they could use to such terrible effect in hand-to-hand battle. Their hairless skins were pale green, faintly scaled, but their massive faces were practically human. Arrogant black eyes under heavy brow ridges met Flandry's gaze with a challenge.

I can understand that they despise us, he thought. *Their civilization is young and vigorous, its energies turned ruthlessly outward; Terra is old, satiated—decadent. Our whole policy is directed toward maintaining the galactic status quo, not because we love peace but because we're comfortable the way things are. We stand in the way of Merseia's dream of an all-embracing galactic empire. We're the first ones they have to smash.*

I wonder—historically, they may be on the right side. But Terra has seen too much bloodshed in her history, has too wise and weary a view of life. We've given up seeking perfection and glory; we've learned that they're chimerical—but that knowledge is a kind of death within us.

Still—I certainly don't want to see planets aflame and humans enslaved and an alien culture taking up the future. Terra is willing to compromise;

but the only compromise Merseia will ever make is with overwhelming force. Which is why I'm here.

A stir came in the streaming red mist, and Aycharaych's tall form was beside him. The Chereionite smiled amiably. "Good morning, Captain Flandry," he said.

"Oh—good morning," said Flandry, starting. The avian unnerved him. For the first time, he had met his professional superior, and he didn't like it.

But he couldn't help liking Aycharaych personally. As they stood waiting, they fell to talking of Polaris and its strange worlds, from which the conversation drifted to the comparative xenology of intelligent primitives throughout the galaxy. Aycharaych had a vast fund of knowledge and a wry humor matching Flandry's. When the horn blew for assembly, they exchanged the regretful glance of brave enemies. *It's too bad we have to be on opposite sides. If things had been different—*

But they weren't.

The hunters strapped themselves into their tiny one-man airjets. Each had a needle-beam projector in the nose, not too much armament when you hunted the Borthudian dragons. Flandry thought that the Sartaz would be more than pleased if the game disposed of some of his guests.

The squadron lifted into the sky and streaked northward for the mountains. Fields and forests lay in dissolving fog below them, and the enormous red disc of Betelgeuse was rising into a purplish sky. Despite himself, Flandry enjoyed the reckless speed and the roar of cloven air around him. It was god-like, this rushing over the world to fight the monsters at its edge.

In a couple of hours, they raised the Borthudian mountains, gaunt windy peaks rearing into the upper sky, the snow on their flanks like blood in the ominous light. Signals began coming over the radio; scouts had spotted dragons here and there, and jet after jet broke away to pursue them. Presently Flandry found himself alone with one other vessel.

As they hummed over fanged crags and swooping canyons, he saw two shadows rise from the ground and his belly muscles tightened. Dragons!

The monsters were a good ten meters of scaled, snake-like length, with jaws and talons to rend steel. Huge leathery wings bore them aloft, riding the wind with lordly arrogance as they hunted the great beasts that terrorized villagers but were their prey.

Flandry kicked over his jet and swooped for one of them. It grew monstrously in his sights. He caught the red glare of its eyes as it banked to meet him. No running away here; the dragons had never learned to be afraid. It rose against him.

He squeezed his trigger and a thin sword of energy leaped out to burn past the creature's scales into its belly. The dragon held to its collision course. Flandry rolled out of its way. The mighty wings clashed meters from him.

He had not allowed for the tail. It swung savagely and the blow shivered the teeth in his skull. The airjet reeled and went into a spin. The dragon stooped down on it and the terrible claws ripped through the thin hull.

Wildly, Flandry slammed over his controls, tearing himself loose. He barrel-rolled, metal screaming as he swung about to meet the charge. His needle beam lashed into the open jaws and the dragon stumbled in midflight. Flandry pulled away and shot again, flaying one of the wings.

He could hear the dragon's scream. It rushed straight at him, swinging with fantastic speed and precision as he sought to dodge. The jaws snapped together and a section of hull skin was torn from the framework. Wind came in to sear the man with numbing cold.

Recklessly, he dove to meet the plunging monster, his beam before him like a lance. The dragon recoiled. With a savage grin, Flandry pursued, slashing and tearing.

The torn airjet handled clumsily. In midflight, it lurched and the dragon was out of his sights. Its wings buffeted him and he went spinning aside with the dragon after him.

The damned thing was forcing him toward the cragged mountainside. Its peaks reached hungrily after him, and the wind seemed to be a demon harrying him closer to disaster. He swung desperately, aware with sudden grimness that it had become a struggle for life with the odds on the dragon's side.

If this was the end, to be shattered against a mountain and eaten by his own quarry—He fought for control.

The dragon was almost on him, rushing down like a thunderbolt. It could survive a collision, but the jet would be knocked to earth. Flandry fired again, struggling to pull free. The dragon swerved and came on in the very teeth of his beam.

Suddenly it reeled and fell aside. The other jet was on it from behind, raking it with deadly precision. Flandry thought briefly that the remaining dragon must be dead or escaped and now its hunter had come to his aid—all the gods bless him, whoever he was!

Even as he watched, the dragon fell to earth, writhing and snapping as it did. It crashed onto a ledge and lay still.

Flandry brought his jet to a landing nearby. He was shaking with reaction, but his chief emotion was a sudden overwhelming sadness. There went another brave creature down into darkness, wiped out by a senseless history that seemed only to have the objective of destroying. He raised a hand in salute as he grounded.

The other jet had already landed a few meters off. As Flandry opened his cockpit canopy, its pilot stepped out.

Aycharaych.

The man's reaction was almost instantaneous. Gratitude and honor had no part in the Service. Here was his greatest enemy, all unsuspecting, and it would be the simplest thing in the world to shoot him down. Aycharaych of Chereion, lost in a hunt for dangerous game, too bad—and remorse could come later, when there was time—

His needle pistol was halfway from the holster when Aycharaych's weapon was drawn. Through the booming wind, he heard the alien's quiet voice: "No."

He raised his own hands, and his smile was bitter. "Go ahead," he invited. "You've got the drop on me."

"Not at all," said Aycharaych. "Believe me, Captain Flandry, I will never kill you except in self-defense. But since I will always be forewarned of your plans, you may as well abandon them."

The man nodded, too weary to feel the shock of the revelation which was here. "Thanks," he said. "For saving my life, that is."

"You're too useful to die," replied Aycharaych candidly, "but I'm glad of it."

They took the dragon's head and flew slowly back toward the palace. Flandry's mind whirled with a gathering dismay.

There was only one way in which Aycharaych could have known of the murder plan, when it had sprung into instantaneous being. And that same fact explained how he knew of every activity and scheme the Terrestrials tried, and how he could frustrate every one of them while his own work went on unhampered.

Aycharaych could read minds!

-3-

Aline's face was white and tense in the red light that streamed into the room. "No," she whispered.

"Yes," said Flandry grimly. "It's the only answer."

"But telepathy—everyone knows its limitations—"

Flandry nodded. "The mental patterns of different races are so alien that a telepath who can sense them has to learn a different 'language' for every species—in fact, for every individual among non-telepathic peoples, whose minds, lacking mutual contact, develop purely personal thought-types. Even then it's irregular and unreliable. I've never let myself be studied by any telepath not on our side, so I'd always considered myself safe.

"But Chereion is a very old planet. Its people have the reputation among the more superstitious Merseians of being sorcerers. Actually, of course, it's simply that they've discovered certain things about the nervous system which nobody else suspects yet. Somehow, Aycharaych must be able to detect some underlying resonance-pattern common to all intelligent beings.

"I'm sure he can only read surface thoughts, those in the immediate consciousness. Otherwise he'd have found out so much from all the

Terrans with whom he must have had contact that Merseia would be ruling Sol by now. But that's bad enough!"

Aline said drearily, "No wonder he spared your life; you've become the most valuable man on his side!"

"And not a thing I can do about it," said Flandry. "He sees me every day. I don't know what the range of his mind is—probably only a few meters; it's known that all mental pulses are weak and fade rapidly with distance. But in any case, every time he meets me he skims my mind, reads all my plans—I just can't help thinking about them all the time—and takes action to forestall them."

"We'll have to get the Imperial scientists to work on a thought screen."

"Of course. But that doesn't help us now."

"Couldn't you just avoid him, stay in your rooms—"

"Sure. And become a complete cipher. I have to get around, see my agents and the rulers of Betelgeuse, learn facts and keep my network operating. And every single thing I learn is just so much work done for Aycharaych—with no effort on his part." Flandry puffed a cigarette into lighting and blew nervous clouds of smoke. "What to do, what to do?"

"Whatever we do," said Aline, "it has to be fast. The Sartaz is getting more and more cool toward our people. While we blunder and fail, Aycharaych is working—bribing, blackmailing, influencing one key official after another. We'll wake up some fine morning to find ourselves under arrest and Betelgeuse the loyal ally of Merseia."

"Fine prospect," said Flandry bitterly.

The waning red sunlight streamed through his windows, throwing pools of dried blood on the floor. The palace was quiet, the nobles resting after the hunt, the servants scurrying about preparing the night's feast. Flandry looked around at the weird decorations, at the unearthly light and the distorted landscape beyond the windows. Strange world under a strange sun, and himself the virtual prisoner of its alien and increasingly hostile people. He had a sudden wild feeling of being trapped.

"I suppose I should be spinning some elaborate counterplot," he said hopelessly. "And then, of course, I'll have to go down to the banquet and let Aycharaych read every detail of it—every little thing I know, laid open to his eyes because I just can't suppress my own thoughts—"

Aline's eyes widened, and her slim hand tightened over his. "What is it?" he asked. "What's your idea?"

"Oh—nothing, Dominic, nothing." She smiled. "I have some direct contact with Sol and—"

"You never told me that."

"No reason for you to know it. I was just wondering if I should report this new trouble or not. Galaxy knows how those muddle-headed bureaucrats will react to the news. Probably yank us back and cashier us for incompetence."

She leaned closer and her words came low and urgent. "Go find Aycharaych, Dominic. Talk to him, keep him busy, don't let him come near me to interfere. He'll know what you're doing, naturally, but he won't be able to do much about it if you're as clever a talker as they say. Make some excuse for me tonight, too, so I don't have to attend the banquet—tell them I'm sick or something. Keep *him* away from me!"

"Sure," he said with a little of his old spirit. "But whatever you're hatching in that lovely head, be quick about it. He'll get at you mighty soon, you know."

He got up and left. She watched him go, with a dawning smile on her lips.

*****

Flandry was more than a little drunk when the party ended. Wine flowed freely at a Betelgeusean banquet, together with music, food, and dancing girls of every race present. He had enjoyed himself—in spite of everything—most of all, he admitted, he'd enjoyed talking to Aycharaych. The being was a genius of the first order in almost every field, and it had been pleasant to forget the dreadfully imminent catastrophe for a while.

He entered his chambers. Aline stood by a little table, and the muted light streamed off her unbound hair and the shimmering robe she wore. Impulsively, he kissed her.

"Good night, honey," he said. "It was nice of you to wait for me."

She didn't leave for her own quarters. Instead, she held out one of the ornate goblets on the table. "Have a nightcap, Dominic," she invited.

"No, thanks. I've had entirely too many."

"For me." She smiled irresistibly. He clinked glasses with her and let the dark wine go down his throat.

It had a peculiar taste, and suddenly he felt dizzy, the room wavered and tilted under him. He sat down on his bed until it had passed, but there was an—oddness—in his head that wouldn't go away.

"Potent stuff," he muttered.

"We don't have the easiest job in the world," said Aline softly. "We deserve a little relaxation." She sat down beside him. "Just tonight, that's all we have. Tomorrow is another day, and a worse day."

He would never have agreed before, his nature was too cool and self-contained, but now it was all at once utterly reasonable. He nodded.

"And you love me, you know," said Aline.

And he did.

Much later, she leaned close against him in the dark, her hair brushing his cheek, and whispered urgently: "Listen, Dominic, I have to tell you this regardless of the consequences; you have to be prepared for it."

He stiffened with a return of the old tension. Her voice went on, a muted whisper in the night: "I've contacted Sol by courier robot and gotten in touch with Fenross. He has brains, and he saw at once what must be done. It's a poor way, but the only way.

"The fleet is already bound for Betelgeuse. The Merseians think most of our strength is concentrated near Llynathawr, but that's just a brilliant piece of deception—Fenross' work. Actually, the main body is quite near, and they've got a new energy screen that'll let them slip past the Betelgeusean cordon without being detected. The night after tomorrow, a strong squadron will land in Gunazar Valley, in the Borthudians, and establish a beachhead. A detachment will immediately move to occupy the capital and capture the Sartaz and his court."

Flandry lay rigid with shock. "But this means war!" he strangled. "Merseia will strike at once, and we'll have to fight Betelgeuse too."

"I know. But the Imperium has decided we'll have a better chance this way. Otherwise, it looks as if Betelgeuse will go to the enemy by default.

"It's up to us to keep the Sartaz and his court from suspecting the truth till too late. We have to keep them here at the palace. The capture of the leaders of an absolute monarchy is always a disastrous blow. Fenross and Walton think Betelgeuse will surrender before Merseia can get here.

“By hook or crook, Dominic, you’ve got to keep them unaware. That’s your job; at the same time, keep on distracting Aycharaych, keep him off my neck.”

She yawned and kissed him. “Better go to sleep now,” she said. “We’ve got a tough couple of days ahead of us.”

He couldn’t sleep. He got up when she was breathing quietly and walked over to the balcony. The knowledge was staggering. That the Empire, the bungling decadent Empire, could pull such a stroke and hope to get away with it!

Something stirred in the garden below. The moonlight was dim red on the figure that paced between two Merseian bodyguards. Aycharaych!

Flandry stiffened in dismay. The Chereionite looked up and he saw the wise smile on the telepath’s face. *He knew.*

In the following two days, Flandry worked as he had rarely worked before. There wasn’t much physical labor involved, but he had to maintain a web of complications such that the Sartaz would have no chance for a private audience with any Merseian and would not leave the capital on one of his capricious journeys. There was also the matter of informing such Betelgeusean traitors as were on his side to be ready, and—

It was nerve-shattering. To make matters worse, something was wrong with him: clear thought was an effort; he had a new and disastrous tendency to take everything at face value. What had happened to him?

Aycharaych excused himself on the morning after Aline’s revelation and disappeared. He was out arranging something hellish for the Terrans when they arrived, and Flandry could do nothing about it. But at least it left him and Aline free to carry on their own work.

He knew the Merseian fleet could not get near Betelgeuse before the Terrans landed. It is simply not possible to conceal the approximate whereabouts of a large fighting force from the enemy. How it had been managed for Terra, Flandry couldn't imagine. He supposed that it would not be too large a task force which was to occupy Alfzar—but that made its mission all the more precarious.

The tension gathered, hour by slow hour. Aline went her own way, conferring with General Bronson, the human-Betelgeusean officer whom she had made her personal property. Perhaps he could disorganize the native fleet at the moment when Terra struck. The Merseian nobles plainly knew what Aycharaych had found out; they looked at the humans with frank hatred, but they made no overt attempt to warn the Sartaz. Maybe they didn't think they could work through the wall of suborned and confused officials which Flandry had built around him—more likely, Aycharaych had suggested a better plan for them. There was none of the sense of defeat in them which slowly gathered in the human.

It was like being caught in spider webs, fighting clinging gray stuff that blinded and choked and couldn't be pulled away. Flandry grew haggard, he shook with nervousness, and the two days dragged on.

He looked up Gunazar Valley in the atlas. It was uninhabited and desolate, the home of winds and the lair of dragons, a good place for a secret landing—only how secret was a landing that Aycharaych knew all about and was obviously ready to meet?

"We haven't much chance, Aline," he said to her. "Not a prayer, really."

"We'll just have to keep going." She was more buoyant than he, seemed almost cheerful as time stumbled past. She stroked his hair tenderly. "Poor Dominic, it isn't easy for you."

The huge sun sank below the horizon—the second day, and tonight was the hour of decision. Flandry came out into the great conference hall to find it almost empty.

"Where are the Merseians, your Majesty?" he asked the Sartaz.

"They all went off on a special mission," snapped the ruler. He was plainly ill pleased with the intriguing around him, of which he would be well aware.

A special mission—O almighty gods!

Aline and Bronson came in and gave the monarch formal greeting. "With your permission, your Majesty," said the general, "I would like to show you something of great importance in about two hours."

"Yes, yes," mumbled the Sartaz and stalked out.

Flandry sat down and rested his head on one hand. Aline touched his shoulder gently. "Tired, Dominic?"she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "I feel rotten. Just can't think these days."

She signaled to a slave, who brought a beaker forward. "This will help," she said. He noticed sudden tears in her eyes. What was the matter?

He drank it down without thought. It caught at him, he gasped and grabbed the chair arms for support. "What the devil—"

It spread through him with a sudden coolness that ran along his nerves toward his brain. It was like the hand that Aline had laid on his head, calming, soothing—

Clearing!

Suddenly he sprang to his feet. The whole preposterous thing stood forth in its raw grotesquerie—tissue of falsehoods, monstrosity of illogic!

The Fleet *couldn't* have moved a whole task force this close without the Merseian intelligence knowing of it. There *couldn't* be a new energy screen that he hadn't heard of. Fenross would never try so fantastic a scheme as the occupation of Betelgeuse before all hope was gone.

He didn't love Aline. She was brave and beautiful, but he didn't love her.

But he *had*. Three minutes ago, he had been desperately in love with her.

He looked at her through blurring eyes as the enormous truth grew on him. She nodded, gravely, not seeming to care that tears ran down her cheeks. Her lips whispered a word that he could barely catch.

"Goodbye, my dearest."

-4-

They had set up a giant televisor screen in the conference hall, with a row of seats for the great of Alfzar. Bronson had also taken the precaution of lining the walls with royal guardsmen whom he could trust—long rows of flashing steel and impassive blue faces, silent and motionless as the great pillars holding up the soaring roof.

The general paced nervously up and down before the screen, looking at his watch unnecessarily often. Sweat glistened on his forehead. Flandry sat relaxed; only one who knew him well could have read the tension that was like a coiled spring in him. Only Aline seemed remote from the scene, too wrapped in her own thoughts to care what went on.

"If this doesn't work, you know, we'll probably be hanged," said Bronson.

"It ought to," answered Flandry tonelessly. "If it doesn't, I won't give much of a damn whether we hang or not."

He was prevaricating there; Flandry was most fond of living, for all the wistful half-dreams that sometimes rose in him.

A trumpet shrilled, high brassy music between the walls and up to the ringing rafters. They rose and stood at attention as the Sartaz and his court swept in.

His yellow eyes were suspicious as they raked the three humans.

"You said that there was to be a showing of an important matter," he declared flatly. "I *hope* that is correct."

"It is, your Majesty," said Flandry easily. He was back in his element, the fencing with words, the casting of nets to entrap minds. "It is a matter of such immense importance that it should have been revealed to you weeks ago. Unfortunately, circumstances did not permit that—as the court shall presently see—so your Majesty's loyal general was forced to act on his own discretion with what help we of Terra could give him. But if our work has gone well, the moment of revelation should also be that of salvation."

"It had better be," said the Sartaz ominously. "I warn you—all of you—that I am sick of the spying and corruption the empires have brought with them. It is about time to cut the evil growth from Betelgeuse."

"Terra has never wished Betelgeuse anything but good, your Majesty," said Flandry, "and as it happens, we can offer proof of that. If—"

Another trumpet cut off his voice, and the warder's shout rang and boomed down the hall: "Your Majesty, the Ambassador of the Empire of Merseia asks audience."

The huge green form of Lord Korvash of Merseia filled the doorway with a flare of gold and jewelry. And beside him—Aycharaych!

Flandry was briefly rigid with shock. If that opponent came into the game now, the whole plan might crash to ruin. It was a daring, precarious structure which Aline had built; the faintest breath of argument could dissolve it—and then the lightnings would strike!

One was not permitted to bear firearms within the palace, but the dueling sword was a part of full dress. Flandry drew his with a hiss of metal and shouted aloud: “Seize those beings! They mean to kill the Sartaz!”

Aycharaych’s golden eyes widened as he saw what was in Flandry’s mind. He opened his mouth to denounce the Terran—and leaped back in bare time to avoid the man’s murderous thrust.

His own rapier sprang into his hand. In a whirr of steel, the two spies met.

Korvash the Merseian drew his own great blade in sheer reflex. “Strike him down!” yelled Aline. Before the amazed Sartaz could act, she had pulled the stun pistol he carried from the holster and sent the Merseian toppling to the floor.

She bent over him, deftly removing a tiny needle gun from her bodice and palming it on the ambassador. “Look, your Majesty,” she said breathlessly, “he had a deadly weapon. We knew the Merseians planned no good, but we never thought they would dare—”

The Sartaz’s gaze was shrewd on her. “Maybe we’d better wait to hear his side of it,” he murmured.

Since Korvash would be in no position to explain his side for a good hour, Aline considered it a victory.

But Flandry—her eyes grew wide and she drew a hissing gasp as she saw him fighting Aycharaych. It was the swiftest, most vicious duel she had ever seen, leaping figures and blades that were a blur of speed, back and forth along the hall in a clamor of steel and blood.

"Stop them!" she cried, and raised the stunner.

The Sartaz laid a hand on hers and took the weapon away. "No," he said. "Let them have it out. I haven't seen such a show in years."

"Dominic—" she whispered.

Flandry had always thought himself a peerless fencer, but Aycharaych was his match. Though the Chereionite was hampered by gravity, he had a speed and precision which no human could ever meet, his thin blade whistled in and out, around and under the man's guard to rake face and hands and breast, and he was smiling—smiling.

His telepathy did him little or no good. Fencing is a matter of conditioned reflex—at such speeds, there isn't time for conscious thought. But perhaps it gave him an extra edge, just compensating for the handicap of weight.

Leaping, slashing, thrusting, parrying, clang and clash of cold steel, no time to feel the biting edge of the growing weariness—dance of death while the court stood by and cheered.

Flandry's own blade was finding its mark; blood ran down Aycharaych's gaunt cheeks and his tunic was slashed to red ribbons. The Terran's plan was simple and the only one possible for him. Aycharaych would tire sooner, his reactions would slow—the thing to do was to stay alive that long!

He let the Chereionite drive him backward down the length of the hall, leap by leap, whirling around with sword shrieking in hand. Thrust, parry, riposte, recovery—*whirr, clang!* The rattle of steel filled the hall and the Sartaz watched with hungry eyes.

The end came as he was wondering if he would ever live to see Betelgeuse rise again. Aycharaych lunged and his blade pierced Flandry's left shoulder. Before he could disengage it, the man had knocked the weapon spinning from his hand and had his own point against the throat of the Chereionite.

The hall rang with the savage cheering of Betelgeuse's masters. "Disarm them!" shouted the Sartaz.

Flandry drew a sobbing breath. "Your Majesty," he gasped, "let me guard this fellow while General Bronson goes on with our show."

The Sartaz nodded. It fitted his sense of things.

Flandry thought with a hard glee: *Aycharaych, if you open your mouth, so help me, I'll run you through.*

The Chereionite shrugged, but his smile was bitter.

"Dominic, Dominic!" cried Aline, between laughter and tears.

General Bronson turned to her. He was shaken by the near ruin. "Can you talk to them?" he whispered. "I'm no good at it."

Aline nodded and stood boldly forth. "Your Majesty and nobles of the court," she said, "we shall now prove the statements we made about the treachery of Merseia.

"We of Terra found out that the Merseians were planning to seize Alfzar and hold it and yourselves until their own fleet could arrive to complete the occupation. To that end they are assembling this very night in Gunazar Valley of the Borthudian range. A flying squad will attack and capture the palace—"

She waited until the uproar had subsided. "We could not tell your Majesty or any of the highest in the court," she resumed coolly, "for the Merseian spies were everywhere and we had reason to believe that one of them could read your minds. If they had known anyone knew of their plans, they would have acted at once. Instead we contacted General Bronson, who was not high enough to merit their attention, but who did have enough power to act as the situation required.

"We planted a trap for the enemy. For one thing, we mounted telescopic telecameras in the valley. With your permission, I will now show what is going on there this instant."

She turned a switch and the scene came to life—naked crags and cliffs reaching up toward the red moons, and a stir of activity in the shadows. Armored forms were moving about, setting up atomic guns, warming the engines of spaceships—and they were Merseians.

The Sartaz snarled. Someone asked, "How do we know this is not a falsified transmission?"

"You will be able to see their remains for yourself," said Aline. "Our plan was very simple. We planted atomic land mines in the ground. They are radio controlled." She held up a small switch-box wired to the televisor, and her smile was grim. "This is the control. Perhaps your Majesty would like to press the button?"

"Give it to me," said the Sartaz thickly. He thumbed the switch.

A blue-white glare of hell-flame lit the screen. They had a vision of the ground fountaining upward, the cliffs toppling down, a cloud of radioactive dust boiling up toward the moons, and then the screen went dark.

"The cameras have been destroyed," said Aline quietly. "Now, your Majesty, I suggest that you send scouts there immediately. They will find enough remains to verify what the televisor has shown. I would further suggest that a power which maintains armed forces within your own territory is not a friendly one!"

Korvash and Aycharaych were to be deported with whatever other Merseians were left in the system—once Betelgeuse had broken diplomatic relations with their state and begun negotiating an alliance with Terra. The evening before they left, Flandry gave a small party for them in his apartment. Only he and Aline were there to meet them when they entered.

"Congratulations," said Aycharaych wryly. "The Sartaz was so furious he wouldn't even listen to our protestations. I can't blame him—you certainly put us in a bad light."

"No worse than your own," grunted Korvash angrily. "Hell take you for a lying hypocrite, Flandry. You know that Terra has her own forces and agents in the Betelgeusean System, hidden on wild moons and asteroids. It's part of the game."

"Of course I know it," smiled the Terran. "But does the Sartaz? However, it's as you say—the game. You don't hate the one who beats you in chess. Why then hate us for winning this round?"

"Oh, I don't," said Aycharaych. "There will be other rounds."

"You've lost much less than we would have," said Flandry. "This alliance has strengthened Terra enough for her to halt your designs, at least temporarily. But we aren't going to use that strength to launch a war against you, though I admit that we should. The Empire wants only to keep the peace."

"Because it doesn't dare fight a war," snapped Korvash.

They didn’t answer. Perhaps they were thinking of the cities that would not be bombed and the young men that would not go out to be killed. perhaps they were simply enjoying a victory.

Flandry poured wine. “To our future amiable enmity,” he toasted.

“I still don’t see how you did it,” said Korvash.

“Aline did it,” said Flandry. “Tell them, Aline.”

She shook her head. She had withdrawn into a quietness which was foreign to her. “Go ahead, Dominic,” she murmured. “It was really your show.”

“Well,” said Flandry, not loath to expound, “when we realized that Aycharaych could read our minds, it looked pretty hopeless. How can you possibly lie to a telepath? Aline found the answer—by getting information which just isn’t true.

“There’s a drug in this system called *sorgan* which has the property of making its user believe anything he’s told. Aline fed me some without my knowledge and then told me that fantastic lie about Terra coming in to occupy Alfzar. And, of course, I accepted it as absolute truth. Which you, Aycharaych, read in my mind.”

“I was puzzled,” admitted the Chereionite. “It just didn’t look reasonable to me; but as you said, there didn’t seem to be any way to lie to a telepath.”

“Aline’s main worry was then to keep out of mind-reading range,” said Flandry. “You helped us there by going off to prepare a warm reception for the Terrans. You gathered all your forces in the valley, ready to blast our ships out of the sky.”

“Why didn’t you go to the Sartaz with what you knew—or thought you knew?” asked Korvash accusingly.

Aycharaych shrugged. “I realized Captain Flandry would be doing his best to prevent me from doing that and to discredit any information I could get that high,” he said. “You yourself agreed that our best opportunity lay in repulsing the initial attack ourselves. That would gain us far more favor with the Sartaz; moreover, since there would have been overt acts on both sides, war between Betelgeuse and Terra would then have been inevitable—whereas if the Sartaz had learned in time of the impending assault, he might have tried to negotiate.”

“I suppose so,” said Korvash glumly.

“Aline, of course, prevailed on Bronson to mine the valley,” said Flandry. “The rest you know. When you yourselves showed up—”

“To tell the Sartaz, now that it was too late,” said Aycharaych.

“—we were afraid that the ensuing argument would damage our own show. So we used violence to shut you up until it had been played out.” Flandry spread his hands in a gesture of finality. “And that, gentlemen, is that.”

“There will be other tomorrows,” said Aycharaych gently. “But I am glad we can meet in peace tonight.”

The party lasted well on toward dawn. When the aliens left, with many slightly tipsy expressions of good will and respect, Aycharaych took Aline’s hand in his own bony fingers. His strange golden eyes searched hers, even as she knew his mind was looking into the depths of her own.

“Goodbye, my dear,” he said, too softly for the others to hear. “As long as there are women like you, I think Terra will endure.”

She watched his tall form go down the corridor and her vision blurred a little. It was strange to think that her enemy knew what the man beside her did not.

OUTPOST OF EMPIRE

"No dragons are flying—"

Karlsarm looked up. The fog around him was as yet thin enough that he could glimpse the messenger. Its wings sickled across nightblue and those few stars—like diamond Spica and amber Betelgeuse—which were too bright and near to be veiled. So deep was the stillness that he heard the messenger's feathers rustle.

"Good," he murmured. "As I hoped." Louder: "Inform Mistress Jenith that she can get safely across open ground now. She is to advance her company to Gallows Wood on the double. There let someone keep watch from a treetop, but do not release the fire bees without my signal. Whatever happens."

The sweet, unhuman voice of the messenger trilled back his order.

"Correct," Karlsarm said. The messenger wheeled and flew northward.

"What was that?" Wolf asked.

"Enemy hasn't got anyone aloft, far as Rowlan's scouts can tell," Karlsarm replied. "I instructed—"

"Yes, yes," growled his lieutenant. "I do know Anglic, if not bird language. But are you sure you want to keep Jenith's little friends in reserve? We might have no casualties at all if they went in our van."

"But we'd have given away another secret. And we may very badly want a surprise to spring, one of these times. You go tell Mistress Randa the main body needs maximum cover. I'm after a last personal look. When I get back, we'll charge."

Wolf nodded. He was a rangy man, harsh-faced, his yellow hair braided. His fringed leather suit did not mark him off for what he was, nor did his weapons; dirk and tomahawk were an ordinary choice. But the two great hellhounds that padded black at his heels could only have followed the Grand Packmaster of the Windhoek.

He vanished into fog and shadow. Karlsarm loped forward. He saw none of his hundreds, but he sensed them in more primitive ways. The mist patch that hid them grew tenuous with distance, until it lay behind the captain. He stopped, shadow-roofed by a lone sail tree, and peered before and around him.

They had had the coastal marshes to conceal them over most of their route. The climb by night, however, straight up Onyx Heights, had required full moonlight if men were not to fall and shatter themselves. This meant virtually no moon on the second night, when they entered the cultivated part of the plateau. But with a sidereal period of two and a third days, Selene rose nearly full again, not long after the third sundown, and waxed as it crossed the sky. At present it was hardly past maximum, a dented disk flooding the land with iciness. Karlsarm felt naked to the eyes of his enemies.

None seemed aware of him, though. Fields undulated away to a flat eastern horizon, kilometer after kilometer. They were planted in rye, silvery and silent under the moon, sweet-smelling where feet had crushed it. Far off bulked a building, but it was dark; probably nothing slept within except machines. The fact that agriculture took place entirely on robotized latifundia made the countryside thinly populated. Hence the possibility existed for Karlsarm of leading his people unobserved across it after sunset—to a five-kilometer distance from Domkirk.

Even this near, the city looked small. It was the least of the Nine, housing only about fifty thousand, and it was the second oldest, buildings huddled close together and much construction underground in the manner of pioneer settlements. Aside from streets, its mass was largely unilluminated. They were sober folk here who went early to bed. In places windows gleamed yellow. A single modern skyscraper sheened metallic beneath Selene, and it too had wakeful rooms. Several upper facets of the cathedral were visible above surrounding roofs. The moon was so brilliant that Karlsarm would have sworn he could see color in their reflection of it.

A faint murmur of machinery breathed across the fields. Alien it was, but Karlsarm almost welcomed the sound. The farmlands had oppressed him with their emptiness—their essential *lifelessness,* no matter how rich the crops and sleek the pastured animals—when he remembered his forests. He shivered in the chill. As if to seek comfort, he looked back westward. The fogbank that camouflaged the center of his army shimmered startingly white. Surely it had been seen; but the phenomenon occurred naturally, this near the Lawrencian Ocean. Beyond the horizon, barely visible, as if disembodied, floated the three highest snowpeaks of the Windhoek. Home was a long march off: an eternal march for those who would die.

“Stop that, you,” Karlsarm whispered to himself. He unshipped his crossbow, drew a quarrel from his quiver, loaded and cocked the piece. Hard pull on the crank, snick of the pawl were somehow steadying. He was not a man tonight but a weapon.

He trotted back to his people. The fog was thickening, swirling in cold wet drifts, as Mistress Randa sent ever more of her pets from their cages. He heard her croon a spell—

Shining mist, flow and twist,
fill this cup of amethyst.
Buzzing dozens, brotherlings,
sing your lullaby of wings.
Ah! the moonlight flew and missed!

He wondered if it was really needed. Why must women with Skills be that secretive about their work? He heard likewise the tiny hum of the insects, and glimpsed a few when Selene sparked iridescence off them. They kept dropping down to the ryestalks after they had exuded all the droplets they could, filling up with dew and rising again. Soon the cloud was so dense that men were almost blind. They kept track of each other by signals—imitated bird calls, chirrs, cheeps, mews—and by odor, most of them having put on their distinctive war perfumes.

Karlsarm found Wolf near the red gleam of one hellhound's eyes. "All set?" he asked.

"Aye. If we can keep formation in this soup."

"We'll keep it close enough. Got a lot of practice in the tidelands, didn't we? Very well, here we go." Karlsarm uttered a low, shuddering whistle.

The sound ran from man to man, squad to squad, and those who knew flutecat language heard it as: "We have stalked the prey down, let us leap."

The fog rolled swiftly toward Domkirk; and none in the city observed that there was no wind to drive it.

John Ridenour had arrived that day. But he had made planetfall a week earlier and before then had crammed himself with every piece of information about Freehold that was available to him—by any means necessary, from simple reading and conversation to the most arduous machine-forced mnemonics. His whole previous career taught him how little knowledge that was. It had amused as well as annoyed him that he ended his journey explaining things to a crewman of the ship that brought him thither.

The *Ottokar* was a merchantman, Germanian owned, as tautly run as most vessels from that world. Being short of bottom on the frontiers, the Imperial Terrestrial Navy must needs charter private craft when trouble broke loose. They carried only materiel; troops still went in regular transports, properly armed and escorted.

But Ridenour was a civilian: also on time charter, he thought wryly. His job was not considered urgent. They gave him a Crown ticket on Terra and said he could arrange his own passage. It turned out to involve several transfers from one ship to another, two of them with nonhuman crews. Traffic was sparse, here where the Empire faded away into a wilderness of suns unclaimed and largely unexplored. The Germanians were of his own species, of course. But since they were a bit standoffish by culture, and he by nature, he had rattled about rather alone on what was to be the final leg of his trip.

Now, when he would actually have preferred silence and solitude, the off-duty steward's mate joined him in the saloon and insisted on talking. That, was the annoyance—with Freehold in the viewscope.

"I have never seen anything more…*prachtig*…more magnificent," the steward's mate declared.

Then why not shut your mouth and watch it? grumbled Ridenour to himself.

“But this is my first long voyage,” the other went on shyly.

He was little more than a boy, little older than Ridenour’s first son. No doubt the rest of the men kept him severely in his place. Certainly he had hitherto been mute as far as the passenger was concerned. Ridenour found he could not be ungracious to him. “Are you enjoying it…ah, I don’t know your name?”

“Dietrich, sir. Dietrich Steinhauer. Yes, the time has been interesting. But I wish they would tell me more about the port planets we make on our circuit. They do not like me to question them.”

“Well, don’t take that to heart,” Ridenour advised. He leaned back in his chair and got out his pipe—a tall, wiry, blond, hatchet-faced man, his gray tunic-and-trousers outfit more serviceable than fashionable. “With so much loneliness between the stars, so much awe, men have to erect defenses. Terrans are apt to get boisterous on a long voyage. But from what I’ve heard of Germanians, I could damn near predict they’d withdraw into routine and themselves. Once your shipmates grow used to you, decide you’re a good reliable fellow, they’ll thaw.”

“Really? Are you an ethnologist, sir?”

“No, xenologist.”

“But there are no nonhumans on Freehold, except the Arulians. Are there?”

“N-no. Presumably not. Biologically speaking, at any rate. But it is a strange planet, and such have been known to do strange things to their colonists.” Dietrich gulped and was quiet for a few blessed minutes.

The globe swelled, ever greater in its changing phases as the *Ottokar* swung down from parking orbit. Against starry blackness it shone blue, banded with blinding white cloudbanks, the continents hardly visible through the deep air. The violet border that may be seen from space on the rim of any terrestroid world was broader and more richly hued than Terra's. Across the whole orb flickered aurora, invisible on dayside but a pale sheet of fire on nightside. It would not show from the ground, being too diffuse; Freehold lacked the magnetic field to concentrate solar particles at the poles. Yet here it played lambent before the eye, through the thin upper layers of atmosphere. For the sun of Freehold was twice as luminous as Sol, a late type F. At a distance of 1.25 a.u., its disk was slightly smaller than that which Terra sees. But the illumination was almost a third again as great, more white than yellow; and through a glare filter one could watch flares and prominences leap millions of kilometers into space and shower fierily back.

The single moon hove into view. It was undistinguished, even in its name (how many satellites of human-settled worlds are known as Selene?), having just a quarter the mass of Luna. But it was sufficiently close in to show a fourth greater angular diameter. Because of this, and the sunlight, and a higher albedo—fewer mottlings—it gave better than twice the light. Ridenour spied it full on and was almost dazzled.

"Freehold is larger than Germania, I believe." Dietrich's attempt at pompousness struck Ridenour as pathetic.

"Or Terra," the xenologist said. "Equatorial diameter in excess of 16,000 kilometers. But the mean density is quite low, making surface gravity a bare ninety per cent of standard."

"Then why does it have such thick air, sir? Especially with an energetic sun and a nearby moon of good size."

Hm, Ridenour thought, you're a pretty bright boy after all. Brightness should be encouraged; there's precious little of it around. "Gravitational potential," he said. "Because of the great diameter, field strength decreases quite slowly. Also, even if the ferrous core is small, making for weaker tectonism and less outgassing of atmosphere than normal—still, the sheer pressure of mass on mass, in an object this size, was bound to produce respectable quantities of air and heights of mountains. These different factors work out to the result that the sea-level atmosphere is denser than Terran, but safely breathable at all altitudes of terrain." He stopped to catch his breath.

"If it has few heavy elements, the planet must be extremely old," Dietrich ventured.

"No, the early investigators found otherwise," Ridenour said. "The system's actually younger than Sol's. It evidently formed in some metal-poor region of the galaxy and wandered into this spiral arm afterward."

"But at least Freehold is old by historical standards. I have heard it was settled more than five centuries ago. And yet the population is small. I wonder why?"

"Small initial colony, and not many immigrants afterward, to this far edge of everything. High mortality rates, too—originally, I mean, before men learned the ins and outs of a world which they had never evolved on: a more violent and treacherous world than the one your ancestors found, Dietrich. That's why, for many generations, they tended to stay in their towns, where they could keep nature at bay. But they didn't have the economic base to enlarge the towns very fast. Therefore they practiced a lot of birth control. To this day, there are only nine cities on that whole enormous surface, and five of them are on the same continent. Their inhabitants total fourteen and a half megapeople."

“But I have heard about savages, sir. How many are they?”

“Nobody knows,” Ridenour said. “That’s one of the things I’ve been asked to find out.”

He spoke too curtly, of a sudden, for Dietrich to dare question him further. It was unintentional. He had merely suffered an experience that came to him every once in a while, and shook him down to bedrock.

Momentarily, he confronted the sheer magnitude of the universe.

Good God, he thought, if You do not exist—terrible God, if You do—here we are, Homo sapiens, children of Earth, creators of bonfires and flint axes and proton converters and gravity generators and faster-than-light spaceships, explorers and conquerors, dominators of an Empire which we ourselves founded, whose sphere is estimated to include four million blazing suns… here we are, and what are we? What are four million stars, out on the fringe of one arm of the galaxy, among its hundred billion; and what is the one galaxy among so many?

Why, I shall tell you what we are and these are, John Ridenour. We are one more-or-less intelligent species in a universe that produces sophonts as casually as it produces snowflakes. We are not a hair better than our great, greenskinned, gatortailed Merseian rivals, not even considering that they have no hair; we are simply different in looks and language, similar in imperial appetites. The galaxy—what tiny part of it we can ever control—cares not one quantum whether their youthful greed and boldness overcome our wearied satiety and caution. (Which is a thought born of an aging civilization, by the way).

Our existing domain is already too big for us. We don’t comprehend it. We can’t.

Never mind the estimated four million suns inside our borders. Think just of the approximately one hundred thousand whose planets we do visit, occupy, order about, accept tribute from. Can you visualize the number? A hundred thousand; no more; you could count that high in about seven hours. But can you conjure up before you, in your mind, a well with a hundred thousand bricks in it: and see all the bricks simultaneously?

Of course not. No human brain can go as high as ten.

Then consider a planet, a world, as big and diverse and old and mysterious as ever Terra was. Can you see the entire planet at once? Can you hope to understand the entire planet?

Next consider a hundred thousand of them.

No wonder Dietrich Steinhauer here is altogether ignorant about Freehold. I myself had never heard of the place before I was asked to take this job. And I am a specialist in worlds and the beings that inhabit them. I should be able to treat them lightly. Did I not, a few years ago, watch the total destruction of one?

Oh, no. Oh, no. The multiple millions of…of everything alive…bury the name Starkad, bury it forever. And yet it was a single living world that perished, a mere single world.

No wonder Imperial Terra let the facts about Freehold lie unheeded in the data banks. Freehold was nothing but an obscure frontier dominion, a unit in the statistics. As long as no complaint was registered worthy of the sector governor’s attention, why inquire further? How could one inquire further? Something more urgent is always demanding attention elsewhere. The Navy, the intelligence services, the computers, the decision makers are stretched too ghastly thin across too many stars.

And today, when war ramps loose on Freehold and Imperial marines are dispatched to fight Merseia's Arulian cat's-paws—we still see nothing but a border action. It is most unlikely that anyone at His Majesty's court is more than vaguely aware of what is happening. Certainly our admiral's call for help took long to go through channels: "We're having worse and worse trouble with the hinterland savages. The city people are no use. They don't seem to know either what's going on. Please advise."

And the entire answer that can be given to this appeal thus far is me. One man. Not even a Naval officer—not even a specialist in human cultures—such cannot be gotten, except for tasks elsewhere that look more vital. One civilian xenologist, under contract to investigate, report, and recommend appropriate action. Which counsel may or may not be heeded.

If I die—and the battles grow hotter each month—Lissa will weep; so will our children, for a while. I like to think that a few friends will feel sorry, a few colleagues remark what a loss this is, a few libraries keep my books on micro for a few more generations. However, that is the most I can hope for.

And this big, beautiful planet Freehold can perhaps hope for much less. The news of my death will be slow to reach official eyes. The request for a replacement will move slower yet. It may quite easily get lost.

Then what, Freehold of the Nine Cities and the vast, mapless, wild-man-haunted outlands that encircle them? Then what?

Once the chief among the settlements was Sevenhouses; but battle had lately passed through it. Though the spaceport continued in use and the *Ottokar* set down there, Ridenour learned that Terran military headquarters had been shifted to Nordyke. He hitched a ride in a supply barge. Because of the war, its robopilot was given a human boss, a young lieutenant named Muhammad Sadik, who invited the xenologist to sit in the control turret with him. Thus Ridenour got a good look at the country.

Sevenhouses was almost as melancholy a sight from the air as from the ground. The original town stood intact at one edge; but that was a relic, a few stone-and-concrete buildings which piety preserved. Today's reality had been a complex of industries, dwelling places—mainly apartments—schools, parks, shops, recreation centers. The city was not large by standards of the inner Empire. But it had been neat, bright, bustling, more up-to-date than might have been expected of a community in the marshes.

Now most of it was rubble. What remained lay fire-scarred, crowded with refugees, the machinery silenced, the people sadly picking up bits and pieces of their lives. Among them moved Imperial marines, and warcraft patrolled overhead like eagles.

"Just what happened?" Ridenour asked.

Sadik shrugged. "Same as happened at Oldenstead. The Arulians made an air assault—airborne troops and armor, I mean. They knew we had a picayune garrison and hoped to seize the place before we could reinforce. Then they'd pretty well own it, you know, the way they've got Waterfleet and Startop. If the enemy occupies a townful of His Majesty's subjects, we can't scrub that town. At least, doctrine says we can't...thus far. But here, like at Oldenstead, our boys managed to hang on till we got help to them. We clobbered the blues pretty good, too. Not many escaped. Of course, the ground fighting was heavy and kind of bashed the town around." He gestured. The barge was now well aloft, and a broad view could be gotten. "Harder on the countryside, I suppose," he added. "We felt free to use nukes there. They sure chew up a landscape, don't they?"

Ridenour scowled. The valley beneath him had been lovely, green and ordered, a checkerboard of mechanized agroenterprises run from the city. But the craters pocked it, and high-altitude bursts had set square kilometers afire, and radiation had turned sere most fields that were not ashen.

He felt relieved when the barge lumbered across a mountain range. The wilderness beyond was not entirely untouched. A blaze had run widely, and fallout appeared to have been heavy. But the reach of land was enormous, and presently nothing lay beneath except life. The forest that made a well-nigh solid roof was not quite like something from ancient Terra: those leaves, those meadows, those rivers and lakes had a curious brilliance; or was that due to sunlight; fierce and white out of a pale-blue sky where cumulus clouds towered intricately shadowed? The air was often darkened and clamorous with bird flocks which must number in the millions. And, as woodland gave way to prairie, Ridenour saw herds of grazers equally rich in size and variety.

“Not many planets this fertile,” Sadik remarked. “Wonder why the colonists haven’t done more with it?”

“Their society began in towns rather than smaller units like family homesteads,” Ridenour answered. “That was unavoidable. Freehold isn’t as friendly to man as you might believe.”

“Oh, I’ve been through some of the storms. I know.”

“And native diseases. And the fact that while native food is generally edible, it doesn’t contain everything needed for human nutrition. In short, difficulties such as are normally encountered in settling a new world.

“They could be overcome, and were; but the process was slow, and the habit of living in a few centers became ingrained. Also, the Freeholders are under a special handicap. The planet is not quite without iron, copper and other heavy elements. But their ores occur too sparsely to support a modern industrial establishment, let alone permit it to expand. Thus Freehold has always depended on extraplanetary trade. And the system lies on the very fringe of human-dominated space. Traffic is slight and freight rates high."

"They could do better, though," Sadik declared. "Food as tasty as what they raise ought to go for fancy prices on places like Bonedry and Disaster Landing—planets not terribly far, lots of metals, but otherwise none too good a home for their colonists." Ridenour wasn't sure if the pilot was patronizing him in revenge. He hadn't meant to be pedantic; it was his professional habit. "I understand that the Nine Cities were in fact developing such trade, with unlimited possibilities for the future," he said mildly. "They also hoped to attract immigrants. But then the war came."

"Yeh," Sadik grunted. "One always does, I guess."

Ridenour recollected that war was no stranger to Freehold. Conflict, at any rate, which occasionally erupted in violence. The Arulian insurgency was the worst incident to date—but perhaps nothing more than an incident, *sub specie aeternitatis.*

The threat from the savages was something else: less spectacular, but apt to be longer lasting, with more pervasive subtle effects on the long-range course of history here.

Nordyke made a pleasant change. The strife had not touched it, save to fill the airport with ships—and the seaport, as its factories drew hungrily on the produce of other continents—and the streets with young men from every corner of the Empire. The modern town, surrounding Catwick's bright turbulent waters, retained in its angular architecture some of the starkness of the old castle-like settlements on the heights above. But in the parks, roses and jasmine were abloom; and elsewhere the taverns brawled with merriment. The male citizens were happily acquiring the money that the Imperialists brought with them; the females were still more happily helping spend it.

Ridenour had no time for amusement, even had he been inclined. Plain to see, Admiral Fernando Cruz Manqual considered him one more nuisance wished on a long-suffering planetary command by a home government that did not know its mass from a Dirac hole. He had to swing more weight than he actually carried, to get billeted in a float-shelter on the bay and arrange his background-information interviews.

One of these was with an Arulian prisoner. He did not speak any language of that world, and the slender, blue-feathered, sharp-snouted biped knew no Anglic. But both were fluent in the principal Merseian tongue, though the Arulian had difficulty with certain Eriau phonemes.

“Relax,” said Ridenour, after the other had been conducted into the office he had borrowed, and the Terran marine had gone out. “I won’t hurt you. I wear this blaster because regulations say I must. But you aren’t so stupid as to attempt a break.”

“No. Nor so disloyal as to give away what would hurt my people.” The tone was more arrogant than defiant, as nearly as one could make comparisons with human emotions. The Arulian had already learned that captives were treated according to the Covenant. The reason was less moral than practical—the same reason why his own army did not try to annihilate Nordyke, though Terra’s effort was concentrated here. Revenge would be total. As matters stood, the prisoners and towns they held, the other towns they could destroy, were bargaining counters. When they gave up the struggle (which surely they must, in a year or two), they could exchange these hostages for the right to go home unmolested.

"Agreed. I simply want to hear your side of the story." Ridenour offered a cigar. "Your species likes tobacco, does it not?"

"I thank." A seven-fingered hand took the gift with ill-concealed eagerness. "But you know why we fight. This is our home."

"Um-m-m...Freehold was man-occupied before your race began space flight."

"True. Yet Arulian bones have strengthened this soil for more than two centuries. By longstanding agreement, the Arulians who lived and died here did so under the Law of the Sacred Horde. For what can your law mean to us, Terran—your law of property to us who do things mutually with our pheromonesharers; your law of marriage to us who have three sexes and a breeding cycle; your law of Imperial fealty to us who find truth's wellspring in Eternal Aruli? We might have compromised, after Freehold was incorporated into your domain. Indeed, we made every reasonable attempt to do so. But repeated and flagrant violation of our rights must in the end provoke secessive action."

Ridenour started his pipe. "Well, now, suppose you look at the matter as I do," he suggested. "Freehold is an old human colony, although it lies far from Terra. It was founded before the Empire and stayed sovereign after the Empire began. There was just no special reason why we should acquire it, take on responsibility for it, while the people remained friendly. But needing trade and not getting many human visitors, they looked elsewhere. The Merseians had lately brought modern technology to Aruli. Arulian mercantile associations were busy in this region. They had the reputation of being industrious and reliable, and they could use Freehold's produce. It was natural that trade should begin; it followed that numerous Arulians should come here to live; and, as you say, it was quite proper to grant them extraterritoriality.

"But." He wagged his pipestem. "Relationships between the Terran and Merseian Empires grew more and more strained. Armed conflict became frequent in the marshes. Freehold felt threatened. By now the planet had —if not a booming industry—at least enough to make it a military asset. A tempting target for anyone. Sovereign independence looked pretty lonely, not to say fictitious. So the Nine Cities applied for membership in the Empire and were accepted—as much to forestall Merseia as for any other reason. Of course the Arulian minority objected. But they were a small minority. And in any case, as you said, compromise should have been possible. Terra respects the rights of client species. We must; they are too many for suppression. In fact, no few nonhumans have Terran citizenship."

"Nevertheless," the prisoner said, "you violated what we hold hallowed."

"Let me finish," Ridenour said. "Your mother world Aruli, its sphere of influence, everything there has lately became a Merseian puppet. No, wait, I know you'll deny that indignantly; but think. Consider your race's recent history. Ask yourself what pronouncements have been made by the current Bearers of the Horns—as regards Merseia versus Terra—and remember that they succeeded by revolutionary overthrow of the legitimate heirs. Never mind what abuses they claim to be correcting; only recall that they are Merseian-sponsored revolutionaries.

"Reflect how your people here, on this planet, have always considered themselves Arulians rather than Freeholders. Reflect how they have, in fact, as tensions increased, supported the interests of Aruli rather than Terra. Maybe this would not have occurred, had the humans here treated you more fairly in the past. But we were confronted with your present hostility. What would you expect us to do—what would you do in our place—but decree some security regulations ? Which is the prerogative of His Majesty's government, you know. The original treaty granting them extraterritoriality was signed by the Nine Cities, not by the Terran Empire.

"So you revolted, you resident aliens. And we discovered to our dismay that the rebellion was well prepared. Multiple tons of war supplies, multiple thousands of troops, had been smuggled beforehand into wilderness areas... from Aruli!"

"That is not true," the prisoner said. "Of course our mother world favors our righteous cause, but—"

"But we have census figures, remember. The registered Arulian-descended Freeholders do not add up to anything like the total in your 'Sacred Horde.' You yourself, my friend, whose ancestors supposedly lived here for generations, cannot speak the language! Oh, I understand Aruli's desire to avoid an open clash with Terra, and Terra's willingness to indulge this desire. But let us not waste our personal time with transparent hypocrisies, you and I."

The prisoner refused response.

Ridenour sighed. "Your sacrifices, what victories you have had, everything you have done is for nothing," he went on. "Suppose you did succeed. Suppose you actually did win your 'independent world in pheromone association with the Holy Ancestral Soil'—do you really think your species would benefit? No, no. The result would mean nothing more than a new weapon for Merseia to use against Terra...a rather cheaply acquired one." His smile was weary. "We're familiar with the process, we humans. We've employed it against each other often enough in our past."

"As you like," the Arulian said. By instinct he was less combative as an individual than a human is, though possibly more so in a collectivity. "Your opinions make scant difference. The great objective will be achieved before long."

Ridenour regarded him with pity. "Have your superiors really kept on telling you that?"

"Surely. What else?"

"Don't you understand the situation? The Empire is putting less effort into the campaign than it might, true. This is a distant frontier, however critical. Two hundred lightyears make a long way from Terra. But our lack of energy doesn't matter in the long run, except to poor tormented Freehold.

"Because this system has in fact been taken by us. You aren't getting any more supplies from outside. You can't. Small fast courier boats might hope to run our blockade, I suppose, if they aren't too many and accept a high percentage of loss. But nothing except a full-sized task force would break it. Aruli cannot help you further. She hasn't that kind of fleet. Merseia isn't going to. The game isn't worth the candle to her. You are cut off. We'll grind you away to nothing if we must; but we hope you'll see reason, give up and depart.

"Think. You call it yaro fever, do you not—that disease which afflicts your species but not ours—for which the antibiotic must be grown on Aruli itself where the soil bacteria are right? We capture more and more of you who suffer from yaro. When did you last see a fresh lot of antibiotic?"

The prisoner screamed. He cast his cigar at Ridenour's feet, sprang from his chair and ran to the office door. "Take me back to the stockade!" he wept.

Ridenour's mouth twisted. Oh, well, he thought, I didn't really hope to learn anything new from any of those pathetic devils.

Besides, the savages are what I'm supposed to investigate. Though I've speculated if perhaps, in the two centuries they lived here, the Arulians had some influence on the outback people. Everybody knows they traded with them to some extent. Did ideas pass, as well as goods?

For certainly the savages have become troublesome.

The next day Ridenour was lucky and got a direct lead. The mayor of Domkirk arrived in Nordyke on official business. And word was that the Domkirk militia had taken prisoners after beating off a raid from the wilderness dwellers. Ridenour waited two days before he got to see the mayor; but that was about par for the course in a project like this, and he found things to do meanwhile.

Rikard Uriason proved to be a short, elegantly clad, fussy man. He was obviously self-conscious about coming from the smallest recognized community on the planet. He mentioned a visit he had once made to Terra and the fact that his daughter was studying on Ansa, twice in the first ten minutes after Ridenour entered his hotel room. He kept trying to talk the Emperor's Anglic and slipping back into Freeholder dialect. He fussed about, falling between the stools of being a gracious host and a man of the universe. Withal, he was competent and well informed where his own job was concerned.

"Yes, sir, we of Domkirk live closer to the outback than anyone else. For various reasons," he said, after they were finally seated with drinks in their hands. A window stood open to the breeze off Catwick—always slightly alien-scented, a hint of the smell that wet iron has on Terra—and the noise of streets and freight-belts, and the view of waters glittering out to the dunes of Longenhook. “Our municipality does not yet have the manpower to keep a radius of more than about two hundred kilometers under cultivation. Remember, Terran crops are fragile on this planet. We can mutate and breed selectively as much as we like. The native life forms will nonetheless remain hardier, eh? And, while robotic machines do most of the physical work, the requirement for supervision, decision-making human personnel is inevitably greater than on a more predictable world. This limits our range. Then too, we are on a coastal plateau. Onyx Heights falls steeply to the ocean, westward to the Windhoek, into marsh—unreclaimable—by us at our present stage of development, at any rate.”

Good Lord, Ridenour thought, I have found a man who can out-lecture me. Aloud: “Are those tidelands inhabited by savages, then?”

“No, sir, I do not believe so. Certainly not in any significant degree. The raiders who plague our borders appear to be centered in the Windhoek Range and the Upwoods beyond. That was where the recent trouble occurred, on that particular margin. We have been fortunate in that the war’s desolation has passed us by. But we feel, on this very account, our patriotic duty is all the more pressing, to make up the agricultural losses caused elsewhere. Some expansion is possible, now that refugees augment our numbers. We set about clearing land in the foothills. A valley, actually, potentially fertile once the weeds and other native pests have been eradicated. Which, with modern methods, takes only about one year. A Freehold year, I mean, circa about twenty-five per cent longer than a Terran year. Ah…where was I?…yes. A band of savages attacked our pioneers. They might have succeeded. They did succeed in the past, on certain occasions, as you may know, sir. By surprise, and numbers, and proximity—for their weapons are crude. Necessarily so, iron and similar metals being scarce. But they did manage, for instance, several years ago, to frustrate an attempt on settling on Moon Garnet Lake, in spite of the attempt being supplied by air and backed by militia with reasonably modern small arms. Ahem! This time we were forewarned. We had our guards disguised as workers, their weapons concealed. Not with any idea of entrapment. Please understand that, sir. Our wish is not to lure any heathen to their deaths, only to avoid conflict. But neither had we any wish for them to spy out our capabilities. Accordingly, when a gang attacked, our militia-men did themselves proud, I may say. They inflicted casualties and drove the bulk of the raiders back into the forest. A full twenty-seven prisoners were flitted to detention in our city jail. I expect the savages will think twice before they endeavor to halt progress again."

Even Uriason must stop for breath sometime. Ridenour took the opportunity to ask: "What do you plan to do with your prisoners?"

The mayor looked a little embarrassed. "That is a delicate question, sir. Technically they are criminals—one might say traitors, when Freehold is at war. However, one is almost obliged morally, is one not, to regard them as hostiles protected by the Covenant? They do by now, unfortunately, belong to a foreign culture; and they do not acknowledge our planetary government. Ah…in the past, rehabilitation was attempted. But it was rarely successful, short of outright brainscrub, which is not popular on Freehold. The problem is much discussed. Suggestions from Imperial experts will be welcomed, once the war is over and we can devote attention to sociodynamic matters."

"But isn't this a rather longstanding problem?" Ridenour said.

"Well, yes and no. On the one hand, it is true that for several centuries people have been leaving the cities for the outback. Their reasons varied. Some persons were mere failures; remember, the original colonists held an ideal of individualism and made scant provision for anyone who could not, ah, cut the mustard. Some were fugitive criminals. Some were disgruntled romantics, no doubt. But the process was quite gradual. Most of those who departed did not vanish overnight. They remained in periodic contact. They traded things like gems, furs, or their own itinerant labor for manufactured articles. But their sons and grandsons tended, more and more, to adopt a purely uncivilized way of life, one which denied any need for what the cities offered."

"Adaptation," Ridenour nodded. "It's happened on other planets. On olden Terra, even—like the American frontier." Seeing that Uriason had never heard of the American frontier, he went on a bit sorrowfully: "Not a good process, is it? The characteristic human way is to adapt the environment to oneself, not oneself to the environment."

"I quite agree, sir. But originally, no one was much concerned in the Nine Cities. They had enough else to think about. And, indeed, emigration to the wilderness was a safety valve. Thus, when the anti-Christian upheavals occurred three hundred years ago, many Christians departed. Hence the Mechanists came to power with relatively little bloodshed—including the blood of Hedonists, who also disappeared rather than suffer persecution. Afterward, when the Third Constitution decreed tolerance, the savages were included by implication. If they wished to skulk about in the woods, why not? I suppose we, our immediate ancestors, should have made ethnological studies on them. A thread of contact did exist, a few trading posts and the like. But...well, sir, our orientation on Freehold is pragmatic rather than academic. We are a busy folk."

"Especially nowadays," Ridenour observed.

"Yes. Very true. I presume you do not speak only of the war. Before it started, we had large plans in train. Our incorporation into His Majesty's domains augured well for the furtherance of civilization on Freehold. We hope that, when the war is over, those plans may be realized. But admittedly the savages are a growing obstacle."

"I understand they sent embassies telling this and that city not to enlarge its operations further."

"Yes. Our spokesman pointed out to them that the Third Constitution gave each city the right to exploit its own hinterland as its citizens desired—a right which our Imperial charter has not abrogated. We also pointed out that they, the savages, were fellow citizens by virtue of residence. They need only adopt the customs and habits of civilization—and we stood ready to lend them educational, financial, even psychotherapeutic assistance toward this end. They need only meet the simple, essential requirements for the franchise, and they too could vote on how to best develop the land. Uniformly they refused. They denied the authority of the mayors and laid claim to all unimproved territory."

Ridenour smiled, but with little mirth. "Cultures, like individuals, die hard," he said.

"True," Uriason nodded. "We civilized people are not unsympathetic. But after all! The outbacker population, their number, is unknown to us. However, it must be on the same order of magnitude as the cities', if not less. Whereas the potential population of a Freehold properly developed is—well, I leave that to your imagination, sir. Ten billion? Twenty? And not any huddled masses, either. Comfortable, well fed, productive, happy human beings. May a few million ignorant woodsrunners deny that many souls the right to be born?"

"None of my business," Ridenour said. "My contract just tells me to investigate."

"I might add," Uriason said, "that Terra's rivalry with Merseia bids fair to go on for long generations. A well populated highly industrialized large planet here on the Betelgeusean frontier would be of distinct value to the Empire. To the entire human species, I believe. Do you not agree?"

"Yes, of course," Ridenour said.

He readily got permission to return with Uriason and study the savage prisoners in depth. The mayor's car flitted back to Domkirk two days later —two of Freehold's twenty-one hour days. And thus it happened that John Ridenour was on hand when the city was destroyed.

Karlsarm loped well in among the buildings, with his staff and guards, before combat broke loose. He heard yells, crack of blasters, hiss of slugthrowers, snap of bowstrings, sharp bark of explosives, and grinned. For they came from the right direction, as did the sudden fire-flicker above the roofs. The airport was first struck. Could it be seized in time, no dragons would fly,

Selene light had drenched and drowned pavement luminosity. Now windows were springing to life throughout the town. Karlsarm's group broke into a run. The on-duty militiamen, barracked at the airport, were few. Wolf 's detachment should be able to handle them in the course of grabbing vehicles and that missile emplacement which Terran engineers had lately installed. But Domkirk was filled with other men, and some of them kept arms at home. Let them boil out and get organized, and the result would be slaughterous. But they couldn't organize without communications, and the electronic center of the municipality was in the new skyscraper.

A door opened, in the flat front of an apartment house. A citizen stood outlined against the lobby behind, pajama-clad, querulous at being roused.

“What the hell d’you think—”

Light spilled across Karlsarm. The Domkirker saw: a man in bast and leather, crossbow in hands, crossbelts sagging with edged weapons; a big muscular body, weatherbeaten countenance, an emblem of authority which was not a decent insigne but the skull and skin of catavray crowning that wild head. *“Savages!”* the Domkirker shrieked. His voice went eunuch high with panic.

Before he had finished the word, the score of invaders were gone from his sight. More and more keening lifted, under a gathering battle racket. It suited Karlsarm. Terrified folk were no danger to him.

When he emerged in the cathedral square, he found that not every mind in town had stampeded.

The church loomed opposite, overtopping the shops which otherwise ringed the plaza. For they were darkened and were, in any event, things that might have been seen anywhere in the Empire. But the bishop’s seat was raised two centuries ago, in a style already ancient. It was all colored vitryl, panes that formed one enormous many-faceted jewel, so that by day the interior was nothing except radiances—and even by moonlight, the outside flashed and dim spectra played. Karlsarm had small chance to admire. Flames stabbed and bullets sang. He led a retreat back around the corner of another building.

“Somebody’s got together,” Link o’ the Cragland muttered superfluously. “Think we can bypass them?”

Karlsarm squinted. The skyscraper poked above the cathedral, two blocks farther on. But whoever commanded this plaza would soon isolate the entire area, once enough men had rallied to him. “We’d better clean them out right away,” he decided. “Quick, intelligencers!”

“Aye.” Noach unslung the box on his shoulder, set it down, talked into its ventholes and opened the lid. Lithe little shapes jumped forth and ran soundlessly off among the shadows. They were soon back. Noach chittered with them and reported: “Two strong squads, one in the righthand street, one in the left. Doorways, walls, plenty of cover. Radiocoms, I think. The commanders talk at their own wrists, anyhow, and we can’t jam short-range transmissions, can we? If we have to handle long-range ones too? Other men keep coming to join them. A team just brought what I suppose must be a tripod blastgun.”

Karlsarm rephrased the information in bird language and sent messengers off, one to a chief of infantry, one to the monitors.

The latter arrived first, as proper tactics dictated. The beasts—half a dozen of them, scaled and scuted crocodilian shapes, each as big as two buffalo—were not proof against Imperial-type guns. Nothing was. And being stupid, they were inflexible; you gave them their orders and hoped you had aimed them right, because that was that. But they were hard to kill…and terrifying if you had never met them before. The blast-gunners unleashed a single ill-directed thunderbolt and fled. About half the group barricaded themselves in a warehouse. The monitors battered down the wall, and the defenders yielded.

Meanwhile the Upwoods infantry dealt with the opposition in the other street. Knifemen could not very well rush riflemen. However, bowmen could pin them down until the monitors got around to them, after which a melee occurred, and everyone fought hand-to-hand anyway. A more elegant solution existed but doctrine stood, to hold secret weapons in reserve. The monitors were expendable, there being no way to evacuate creatures that long and heavy.

Karlsarm himself had already proceeded to capture the skyscraper and establish headquarters. From the top floor, he had an overview of the entire town. It made him nervous to be enclosed in lifeless plastic, and he had a couple of the big windows knocked out. Grenades were needed to break the vitryl. So his technicians manning the communication panels, a few floors down, must endure being caged.

A messenger blew in from the night and fluted: "The field of dragons has been taken, likewise a fortress wherein our people were captive—"

Karlsarm's heart knocked. "Let Mistress Evagail come to me."

Waiting, he was greatly busied. Reports, queries, suggestions, crisis; directives, answers, decisions, actions. The streets were a phosphor web, out to the icy moon-lands, but most of the buildings hulked lightless again, terror drawn back into itself. Sporadic fire flared, the brief sounds of clash drifted faintly to him. The air grew colder.

When Evagail entered, he needed an instant to disengage his mind and recognize her. They had stripped her. They had stripped off her buckskins and gold furs, swathed the supple height of her in a shapeless prison gown; and a bandage still hid most of the ruddy-coiled hair. But then she laughed at him, eyes and mouth alive with an old joy, and he leaped across a desk to seize her.

"Did they hurt you?" he finally got the courage to ask.

"No, except for this battle wound, and it isn't much," she said. "They did threaten us with a…what's the thing called?…a hypnoprobe, when we wouldn't talk. Just as well you came when you did, loveling."

His tone shook: "Better than well. If that horror isn't used exactly right, it cracks apart both reason and soul."

"You forget I have my Skill," she said grimly.

He nodded. That was one reason why he had launched his campaign earlier than planned: not only for her sake, but for fear that the Cities would learn what she was. She might not have succeeded in escaping or in forcing her guards to slay her, before the hypnoprobe vibrations took over her brain.

She should never have accompanied that raid on Falconsward Valley. It was nothing but a demonstration, a test…militarily speaking. Emotionally, though, it had been a lashing back at an outrage committed upon the land. Evagail had insisted on practicing the combat use of her Skill; but her true reason was that she wanted to avenge the flowers. Karlsarm wielded no authority to stop her. He was a friend, occasionally a lover, some day perhaps to father her children; but was not any woman as free as any man? He was the war chief of Upwoods; but was not any Mistress of a Skill necessarily independent of chiefs?

Though a failure, the attack had not been a fiasco. Going into action for the first time, and meeting a cruel surprise, the outbackers had nonetheless conducted themselves well and retreated in good order. It was sheer evil fortune that Evagail was knocked out by a grazing bullet before she had summoned her powers.

“Well, we got you here in time,” Karlsarm said. “I’m glad.” Later he would make a ballad about his gladness.

“How stands your enterprise?”

“We grip the place, barring a few holdouts. I don’t know if we managed to jam every outgoing message. Mistress Persa’s buzzerwave bugs could have missed a transmitter or two. And surely our folk now handling the comcenter can’t long maintain the pretense of being ordinary, undisturbed Domkirkers. No aircraft have showed thus far. Better not delay any more than we must, though. So we ought to clear out the population—and nobody's stirred from their miserable dens!"

"Um-m, what are you doing to call them forth?"

"An all-phones announcement."

Evagail laughed anew. "I can imagine that scene, loveling! A poor, terrified family, whose idea of a wilderness is a picnic in Gallows Wood. Suddenly their town is occupied by hairy, skinclad savages—the same terrible people who burned the Moon Garnet camp and bushwhacked three punitive expeditions in succession and don't pay taxes or send their children to school or support the Arulian war or do *anything* civilized—but were supposed to be safe, cozy hundreds of kilometers to the west and never a match for regular troops on open ground—suddenly, here they are! They have taken Domkirk! They whoop and wave their tomahawks in the very streets! What can our families do but hide in their...apartment, is that the word?...the apartment, with furniture piled across the door? They can't even phone anywhere, the phone is dead, they can't call for help, can't learn what's become of Uncle Enry. Until the thing chimes. Hope leaps in Father's breast. Surely the Imperials, or the Nordyke militia, or somebody has come to the rescue! With shaking hand, he turns the instruments on. In the screen he sees—who'd you assign? Wolf, I'll wager. He sees a long-haired stone-jawed wild man, who barks in an alien dialect: 'Come out of hiding. We mean to demolish your city.'"

Evagail clicked her tongue. "Did you learn nothing about civilization while you were there, Karlsarm?" she finished.

"I was too busy learning something about its machines," he said. "I couldn't wait to be done and depart. What would you do here?"

"Let a more soothing image make reassuring noises for a while. Best a woman; may as well be me." Karlsarm's eyes widened before his head nodded agreement. "Meanwhile," Evagail continued, "you find the mayor. Have him issue the actual order to evacuate." She looked down at her dress, grimaced, pulled it off and threw it in a corner with a violent motion. "Can't stand that rag another heartbeat. Synthetic…dead. Which way is the telephone central?"

Karlsarm told her. Obviously she had already discovered how to use gravshifts and slideways. She departed, striding like a leontine, and he dispatched men on a search for city officialdom.

That didn't take long. Apparently the mayor had been trying to find the enemy leader. Toms led him and another in at the point of a captured blaster. The weapon was held so carelessly that Karlsarm took it and pitched it out the window. But then, Toms was from the Trollspike region—as could be told from his breech-clout and painted skin—and had probably never seen a gun before he enlisted.

Karlsarm dismissed him and stood behind the desk, arms folded, against the dark broken pane, letting the prisoners assess him while he studied them. One looked almost comical, short, pot-bellied, red-faced and pop-eyed, as if the doom of his city were a personal insult. The fellow with him was more interesting, tall, yellow-haired, sharp-featured, neither his hastily donned clothes nor his bearing nor even his looks typical of any place on Freehold that Karlsarm had heard of.

"Who are you?" the little man sputtered. "What's the meaning of this? Do you realize what you have done?"

"I expect he does," said his companion dryly. "Permit introductions. The mayor, Honorable Rikard Uriason; myself, John Ridenour, from Terra."

An Imperialist! Karlsarm must fight to keep face impassive and muscles relaxed. He tried to match Ridenour's bow. "Welcome, sirs. May I ask why you, distinguished outworlder, are here?"

"I was in Domkirk to interview, ah, your people," Ridenour said. "In the hope of getting an understanding, with the aim of eventual reconciliation. As a house guest of Mayor Uriason, I felt perhaps I could assist him—and you—to make terms."

"Well, maybe." Karlsarm didn't bother to sound skeptical. The Empire wasn't going to like what the outbackers intended. He turned to Uriason. "I need your help quite urgently, Mayor. This city will be destroyed. Please tell everyone to move out immediately."

Uriason staggered. Ridenour saved him from falling. His cheeks went gray beneath a puce webwork. "What?" he strangled. "No. You are insane. Insane, I tell you. You cannot. Impossible."

"Can and will, Mayor. We hold your arsenal, your missile emplacement—nuclear weapons, which some of us know how to touch off. At most, we have only a few hours till a large force arrives from another town or an Imperial garrison. Maybe less time than that, if word got out. We want to be gone before then; and so must your folk; and so must the city."

Uriason collapsed in a lounger and gasped for air. Ridenour seemed equally appalled, but controlled it better. "For your own sakes, don't," the Terran said in a voice that wavered. "I know a good bit of human history. I know what sort of revenge is provoked by wanton destruction."

"Not wanton," Karlsarm answered. "I'm quite sorry to lose the cathedral. A work of art. And museums, libraries, laboratories—But we haven't time for selective demolition." He drove sympathy out of his body and said like one of the machines he hated; "Nor do we have the foolishness to let this place continue as base for military operations against us and civilian operations against our land. Whatever happens, it goes up before daybreak. Do you or do you not want the people spared? If you do, get busy and talk to them!"

Evacuation took longer than he had expected. Obedience was swift enough after Uriason's announcement. Citizens moved like cattle, streamed down the streets and out onto the airport expanse, where they milled and muttered, wept and whimpered under the bleak light of waning setting Selene. (With less luminescence to oppose, more stars had appeared, the stars of Empire, but one looked and understood how the gulf gaped between here and them, and shuddered in the pre-dawn wind.) Nevertheless people got in each other's way, didn't grasp the commands of their herders, shuffled, fainted, stalled the procession while they tried to find their kin. Besides, Karlsarm had forgotten there would be a hospital, with some patients who must be carried out and provided for in an outlying latifundium.

But, one by one, the aircraft filled with humans, and ran fifty kilometers upwind, and deposited their cargoes, and returned for more: until at last, when the first eastern paleness began to strengthen, Domkirk stood empty of everything save the wind.

Now the Upwoods army boarded and was flown west. Most of their pilots were city men, knives near to throats. Karlsarm and his few technicians saw the last shuttling vehicle off. It would return for them after they were through. (He was not unaware of the incongruity: skin-clad woods-runners with dirks at their belts, proposing to sunder the atom!) Meanwhile it held Evagail, Wolf and Noach—his cadre—together with Uriason and Ridenour, who were helping control the crowds.

The mayor seemed to have crumpled after the pressure was off him. “You can’t do this,” he kept mumbling. “You can’t do this.” He was led up the gangway into the belly of the flyer.

Ridenour paused, a shadow in the door, and looked down. Was his glance quizzical? “I must admit to puzzlement about your method,” he said. “How will you explode the town without exploding yourselves? I gather your followers have only the sketchiest notion of gadgetry. It isn’t simple to jury-rig a timing device.”

“No,” Karlsarm said, “but it’s simple to launch a missile at any angle you choose.” He waved to unseen Evagail. “We’ll join you shortly.”

The bus took off and dwindled among the last stars. Karlsarm directed his crew in making preparations, then returned outside to watch the first part of the spectacle. Beyond the squat turret at his back, the airfield stretched barren gray to the ruined barracks. How hideous were the works of the Machine People!

But when the missiles departed, that was a heart-stopping sight.

They were solid-fuel rockets. There had been no reason to give expensive gravitic jobs to a minor colonial town so far from the battlefront that the Arulians couldn’t possibly attack it in force. The weapons lifted out of their three launchers some distance away…with slow majesty, spouting sunfire and white clouds, roaring their thundersong that clutched at the throat until Karlsarm gripped his crossbow and glared in defiance of the terror they roused…faster, though, streaking off at a steep slant, rising and rising until the flames flickered out…still rising, beyond his eyes, but drawing to a halt, caught now by the upper winds that twisted their noses downward, by the very rotation of the planet that aimed them at the place they should have defended—

And heavenward flew the second trio. And the third. Karlsarm judged he had better get into shelter.

He was at the bottom of the bunker with his men—tons of steel, concrete, force-screen generator shutting away the sky—when the rockets fell; and even so, he felt the room tremble around him.

Afterward, emerging, he saw a kilometers-high tree of dust and vapor. The command aircraft landed, hastily took on his group and fled the radioactivity. From the air he saw no church, no Domkirk, nothing but a wide, black, vitrified crater ringed in with burning fields.

He shook, as the bombproof had shaken, and said to no one and everyone: “This is what they would do to us!”

Running from the morning, they returned to a dusk before dawn. The other raiders were already there. This was in the eastern edge of wilderness, where hills lifted sharply toward the Windhoek Mountains.

Ridenour walked some distance off. He didn’t actually wish to be alone; if anything, he wanted a companion for a shield between him and the knowledge that two hundred lightyears reached from here to Lissa and the children, their home and Terra. But he must escape Uriason or commit violence. The man had babbled, gobbled, orated and gibbered through their entire time in the air. You couldn’t blame him, maybe. His birthplace as well as his job had gone up in lethal smoke. But Ridenour’s job was to gather information; and that big auburn-haired Evagail woman, whom he’d met not unamicably while she was still captive, had appeared willing to talk if she ever got a chance.

No one stopped Ridenour. Where could he flee? He climbed onto a crest and looked around.

The valley floor beneath him held only a few trees and they small, probably the result of a forest fire, though nature—incredibly vigorous when civilization has not sucked her dry—had covered all scars with a thick blanket of silvery-green trilobed “grass” and sapphire blossoms. No doubt this was why the area had been set for a rendezvous. Aircraft landed easily. Hundreds of assorted tools must have been stacked here beforehand or stolen from the city, for men were attacking the vehicles like ants. Clang, clatter, hails, cheerful oaths profaned the night’s death-hush.

Otherwise there was great beauty in the scene. Eastward, the first color stole across a leaf-roof that ran oceanic to the edge of sight, moving and murmuring in the breeze. Westward, the last few stars glistened in a plum-dark sky, above the purity of Windhoek’s snow-peaks. Everywhere dew sparkled.

Ridenour took out pipe and tobacco and lit up. It made him hiccough a bit, on an empty stomach, but comforted him in his chilled weariness. And in his dismay. He had not imagined the outbackers were such threats. Neither had anyone else, apparently. He recalled remarks made about them in Nordyke and (only yesterday?) Domkirk. “Impoverished wretches… Well, yes, I’m told they eat well with little effort. But otherwise, just think, no fixed abodes, no books, no schools, no connection with the human mainstream, hardly any metal, hardly any energy source other than brute muscle. Wouldn’t you call that an impoverished existence? Culturally as well as materially?”

“Surly, treacherous, arrogant. I tell you, I’ve dealt with them. In trading posts on the wilderness fringe. They do bring in furs, wild fruits, that sort of thing, to swap, mostly for steel tools—but only when they feel like taking the trouble, which isn’t often, and then they treat you like dirt.”

But a much younger man had had another story. "Sure, if one of us looks down on the woodsrunners, they'll look down right back at him. But I was interested and acted friendly, and they invited me to overnight in their camp…Their songs are plain caterwauling, but I've never seen better dancing, not even on Imperial Ballet Corps tapes, and afterward, the girls —! I think I might get me some trade goods and return some day.

"Swinish. Lazy. Dangerous also, I agree. Look what they've done every time someone tried to start a real outpost of civilization in the mid-wilderness. We'll have to clean them out before we can expand. Once this damned Arulian war is over—No, don't get me wrong, I'm not vindictive. Let's treat them like any other criminal: rehabilitation, re-integration into society. I'll go further; I'll admit this is a case of cultural conflict rather than ordinary lawbreaking. So why not let the irreconcilables live out their lives peacefully on a reservation somewhere? As long as their children get raised civilized—

"If you ask me, I think heredity comes into the picture. It wasn't easy to establish the Cities, maintain and enlarge them, the first few centuries on an isolated, metal-poor world like this. Those who couldn't stand the gaff opted out. Once the disease and nutrition problems were licked, you could certainly live with less work in the forests—if you didn't mind turning into a savage and didn't feel any obligation toward the civilization that had made your survival possible. Later, through our whole history, the same thing continued. The lazy, the criminal, the mutinous, the eccentric, the lecherous, the irresponsible, sneaking off…to this very day. No wonder the outbackers haven't accomplished anything. They never will, either. I'm not hopeful about rehabilitating them, myself, not even any of their brats that we institutionalized at birth. Scrub stock!

"Well, yes, I did live with them a while. Ran away when I was sixteen. Mainly, I think now, my reason was—you know, girls—and that part was fine, if you don't wonder about finding some girl you can respect when you're ready to get married. And I thought it'd be romantic. Primitive hunter, that sort of thing. Oh, they were kind enough. But they set me to learning endless nonsense—stuff too silly and complicated to retain in my head—rituals, superstitions—and they don't really hunt much, they have some funny kind of herding—and no stereo, no cars, no air-conditioning—hiking for days on end, and have you ever been *out* in a Freehold rainstorm?—and homesickness, after a while; they don't talk or behave or think like us. So I came back. And mighty draggle-tailed, I don't mind admitting. No, they didn't forbid me. One man guided me to the nearest cultivated land.

"Definitely an Arulian influence, Professor Ridenour. I've observed the outbackers at trading posts, visited some of their camps, made multisensory tapes. Unscientific, no doubt. I'm strictly an amateur as an ethnologist. But I felt somebody must try. They are more numerous, more complicated, more important than Nine Cities generally realize. Here, I'll play some of my recordings for you. Pay special attention to the music and some of the artwork. Furthermore, what little I could find out about their system of reckoning kinship looks as if it's adopted key Arulian notions. And remember, too, the savages—not only on this continent, but on both others, where they seemed to have developed similarly. Everywhere on Freehold, the savages have grown more and more hostile in these past years. Not to our Arulian enemies, but to us! When the Arulians were marshalling in various wilderness regions, did they have savage help? I find it hard to believe they did not."

Ridenour drank smoke and shivered.

He grew peripherally aware of an approach and turned. Evagail joined him on panther feet. She hadn't yet bothered to dress, but the wetness and chill didn't seem to inconvenience her. Ridenour scolded himself for being aware of how good she looked. Grow up, he thought; you're a man with a task at hand.

"Figured I'd join you." Her husky voice used the Up-woods dialect, which was said to be more archaic than that of the Cities. The pronunciation was indeed different, slower and softer. But Ridenour had not observed that vocabulary and grammar had suffered much. Maybe not at all. "You look lonesome. Hungry, too, I'll bet. Here." She offered him a large gold-colored sphere.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Steak apple, we call it. Grows everywhere this time of year."

He lay down his pipe and bit. The fruit was delicious, sweet, slightly smoky, but with an underlying taste of solid protein. Ravenous, he bit again. "Thank you," he said around a mouthful. "This should be a meal by itself."

"Well, not quite. It'll do for breakfast, though."

"I, uh, understand the forests bear ample food the year around."

"Yes, if you know what to find and how. Was necessary to introduce plants and animals from offworld, mutated forms that could survive on Freehold, before humans could live here without any synthetics. Especially urgent to get organisms that concentrate what iron the soil has, and other essential trace minerals. Several vitamins were required as well."

Ridenour stopped chewing because his jaw had fallen. Savages weren't supposed to talk like that! Hastily, hoping to keep her in the right mood, he recovered his composure and said: "I believe the first few generations established such species to make it easier to move into the wilderness and exploit its resources. Why didn't they succeed?"

"Lots of reasons," Evagail said. "Including, I think, a pretty deep-rooted fear of ever being alone." She scowled. Her tone grew harsh. "But there was a practical reason, too. The new organisms upset the ecology. Had no natural enemies here, you see. They destroyed enormous areas of forest. That's how the desert south of Startop originated, did you know? *Our* first generations had a fiend's time restoring balance and fertility."

Again Ridenour gaped, not sure he had heard right.

"Of course, the sun helped," she went on more calmly.

"Beg pardon?"

"The sun." She pointed east. The early light was now like molten steel, and spears of radiance struck upward. Her hair was made copper, her body bronze. "F-type star. Actinic and ionizing radiation gets through in quantity, even with this dense an atmosphere. Biochemistry is founded on highly energetic compounds. Freehold life is more vigorous than Terran, evolves faster, finds more new ways to be what it wants." Her voice rang. "You learn how to become worthy of the forest, or you don't last long."

Ridenour looked away from her. She aroused too much within him.

The work of demolishing the aircraft went apace, despite the often primitive equipment used. He could understand why their metal was often desired. The outbackers were known to have mines of their own, but few and poor; they employed metal only where it was quite unfeasible to substitute stone, wood, glass, leather, bone, shell, fiber, glue…But the vehicles were being stripped with unexpected care. Foremen who obviously knew what they were doing supervised the removal, intact, of articles like transceivers and power cells.

Evagail seemed to follow his thought. “Oh, yes, we’ll use those gadgets while they last,” she said. “They aren’t vital, but they’re handy. For certain purposes.”

Ridenour finished his apple, picked up his pipe and rekindled it. She wrinkled her nose. Tobacco was not a vice of the woodsfolk, though they were rumored to have many others, including some that would astonish a jaded Terran. “I never anticipated that much knowledgeability,” he said. “Including, if I may make bold, your own.”

“We’re not all provincials,” she answered, with a quirk of lips. “Quite a few, like Karlsarm, for instance, have studied offplanet. They’d be chosen, you see, as having the talent for it. Afterward they’d come back and teach others.”

“But—how—”

She studied him for a moment, with disconcertingly steady hazel eyes, before saying: “No harm in telling you, I suppose. I believe you’re an honest man, John Ridenour—intellectually honest—and we do need some communicators between us and the Empire.

“Our people took passage on Arulian ships. This was before the rebellion, of course. It began generations ago. The humans of the Nine Cities paid no attention. They’d always held rather aloof from the Arulians: partly from snobbishness, I suppose, and partly from lack of imagination. But the Arulians traded directly with us, too. That wasn’t any secret. Nor was it a secret that we saw more of them more intimately, learned more from them, than the City men did. It was only that the City men weren’t interested in details of that relationship. They didn’t ask what their ‘inferiors’ were up to. Why should we or the Arulians volunteer lectures about it?”

“And what were you up to?” Ridenour asked softly.

“Nothing, at first, except that we wanted some of our people to have a look at galactic civilization—real civilization, not those smug, ingrown Nine—and the Arulians were willing to sell us berths on their regular cargo ships. In the nature of the case, our visits were mainly to planets outside the Empire, which is why Terra never heard what was going on. At last, though, some, like Karlsarm, did make their way to Imperial worlds, looked around, enrolled in schools and universities…By that time, however, relations on Freehold were becoming strained. There was no predicting what might happen. We thought it best to provide our students with cover identities. That wasn’t hard. No one inquired closely. No one can remember all the folkways of all the colonies. This is such a big galaxy.”

“It is that,” Ridenour whispered. The sun climbed aloft, too brilliant for him to look anywhere near.

“What are you going to do now?” he asked.

“Fade into the woods before enemy flyers track us down. Cache our plunder and start for home.”

“But what about your prisoners? The men who were forced to pilot and —”

“Why, they can stay here. We’ll show them what they can eat and where a spring is. And we’ll leave plenty of debris. A searcher’s bound to spot them before long. Of course, I hope some will join us. We don’t have as many men with civilized training as we could use.”

“Join you?” Ridenour choked. “After what you have done?”

Again she regarded him closely and gravely. “What did we do that was unforgiveable? Killed some men, yes—but in honest battle, in the course of war. Then we risked everything to spare the lives of everybody else.”

“But what about their livelihoods? Their homes? Their possessions, their —”

“What about ours?” Evagail shrugged. “Never mind. I suspect we will get three or four recruits. Young men who’ve felt vaguely restless and unfulfilled. I had hopes about you. But maybe I’d better go talk with someone more promising.”

She turned, not brusquely or hostilely, and rippled back downhill. Ridenour stared after her.

He stood long alone, thinking, while the sun lifted and the sky filled with birds and the work neared an end below him. It was becoming more and more clear that the outbackers—the Free People, as they seemed to call themselves—were not savages.

Neither Miserable Degraded Savages nor Noble Happy Savages. All their generations, shaped by these boundless shadowy whispering woodlands and by what they learned from beings whose species and mode of life were not human: that alchemy had transmuted them into something so strange that their very compatriots in the Nine Cities had failed to identify it.

But what was it?

Not a civilization, Ridenour felt sure. You could not have a true civilization without…libraries, scientific and artistic apparatus, tradition-drenched buildings, reliable transportation and communication…the cumbersome necessary impedimenta of high culture. But you could have a barbarism that was subtle, powerful and deathly dangerous. He hearked back to ages of history, forgotten save by a few scholars. Hyksos in Egypt, Dorians in Achaea, Lombards in Italy, Vikings in England, Crusaders in Syria, Mongols in China, Aztecs in Mexico. Barbarians, to whom the malcontents of civilization often deserted—who gained such skills that incomparably more sophisticated societies fell before them.

Granted, in the long run the barbarian was either absorbed by his conquests or was himself overcome. Toward the end of the pre-space travel era, civilization had been the aggressor, crushing and devouring the last pathetic remnants of barbarism. It was hard to see how Karlsarm's folk could hold out against atomic weapons and earthmoving machinery, let alone prevail over them.

And yet the outbackers had destroyed Domkirk.

And they had no immediate fear of punitive expeditions from Cities or Empire. Why should they? The wilderness was theirs, roadless, townless, mapped only from above and desultorily at that—three-fourths of Freehold's land surface! How could an avenger *find* them? Well, the entire wilderness could be destroyed. High-altitude multimegaton bursts can set a whole continent ablaze. Or, less messily, disease organisms can be synthesized that attack vegetation and soon create a desert.

But no. Such measures would ruin the Nine Cities too. Though they might be protected from direct effects, the planetary climate would be changed, agriculture become impossible, the economy crumble and the people perforce abandon their world. And the Cities were the sole thing that made Freehold valuable, to Terra or Merseia. They formed a center of population and industry on a disputed frontier. Without them, this was simply one more undeveloped globe: because of its metal poverty, not worth anyone's trouble.

Doubtless Karlsarm and his fellow chiefs understood this. The barbarians could only be obliterated gradually, by the piecemeal conquest, clearing and cultivation of their forests. Doubtless they understood that, too, and were determined to forestall the process. Today there remained just eight Cities, of which two were in the hands of their Arulian friends (?) and two others crippled by the chances of war. Whatever the barbarians planned next, and whether they succeeded or not, they might well bring catastrophe on civilized Freeholder man.

Ridenour's mouth tightened. He started down the hill.

Halfway, he met Uriason coming up. He had heard the mayor some distance off, raving over his shoulder while several listening outbackers grinned:

"—treason! I say the three of you are traitors! Oh, yes, you talk about 'attempted rapprochement' and 'working for a detente.' The fact remains you are going over to the monsters who destroyed your own home! And why! Because you aren't fit to be human. Because you would rather loaf in the sun, and play with unwashed sluts, and pretend that a few superstitious ceremonies are 'autochthonous' than take the trouble to cope with this universe. It won't last, gentlemen. Believe me, the glamor will soon wear off. You will come skulking back like many other runaways, and expect to be received as indulgently as they were. But I warn you. This is war. You have collaborated with the enemy. If you dare return, I, your mayor, will do my best to see you prosecuted for treason!"

Puffing hard, he stopped Ridenour. "Ah, sir." His voice was abruptly low. "A word, if you please."

The xenologist suppressed a groan and waited.

Uriason looked back. No one was paying attention. “I really am indignant,” he said after he had his breath. “Three of them! Saying they had long found their work dull and felt like trying something new…But no matter. My performance was merely in character.”

“What?” Ridenour almost dropped his pipe from his jaws.

“Calm, sir, be calm, I beg you.” The little eyes were turned up, unblinking, and would not release the Terran’s. “I took for granted that you also will accompany the savages from here.”

“Why—why—”

“An excellent opportunity to fulfill your mission, really to learn something about them. Eh?”

“But I hadn’t—Well, uh, the idea did cross my mind. But I’m no actor. I’d never convince them I was suddenly converted to their cause. They might believe that of a bored young provincial who isn’t very bright to begin with. Even in those cases, I’ll bet they’ll keep a wary eye out for quite some time. But me, a Terran, a scientist, a middle-aged paterfamilias? The outbackers aren’t stupid, Mayor.”

“I know, I know,” Uriason said impatiently. “Nevertheless, if you offer to go with them—telling them quite frankly that your aim is to collect information—they will take you. I am sure of it. I kept my ears open down yonder, sir, as well as my mouth. The savages are anxious to develop a liaison with the Empire. They will let you return whenever you say. Why should they fear you? By the time you, on foot, reach any of the cities, whatever military intelligence you can offer will be obsolete. *Or so they think.”*

Ridenour gulped. The round red face was no longer comical. It pleaded. After a while, it commanded.

“Listen, Professor,” Uriason said. “I played the buffoon in order to be discounted and ignored. Your own best role is probably that of the impractical academician. But you may thus gain a chance for an immortal name. If you have the manhood!

“Listen, I say. I listened, to them. And I weighed in my mind what I overheard. The annihilation of Domkirk was part of some larger scheme. It was advanced ahead of schedule in order to rescue those prisoners we held. What comes next, I do not know. I am only certain that the plan is bold, large-scale and diabolical. It seems reasonable, therefore, that forces must be massed somewhere. Does it not? Likewise, it seems reasonable that these murderers will join that force. Does it not? Perhaps I am wrong. If so, you have lost nothing. You can simply continue to be the absent-minded scientist, until you decide to go home. And that will be of service per se. You will bring useful data.

“However, if I am right, you will accompany this gang to some key point. And when you arrive…Sir, warcraft of the Imperial Navy are in blockading orbit. When I reach Nordyke, I shall speak to Admiral Cruz. I shall urge that he adopt my plan—the plan that came to me when I saw—here.” Uriason reached under his cloak. Snake swift, he thrust a small object into Ridenour’s hand. “Hide that. If anyone notices and asks you about it, dissemble. Call it a souvenir or something.”

“But…but what—” Like an automaton, Ridenour pocketed the hemicylinder. He felt a pair of super-contacts on either end and a grille on the flat side and assumed that complex microcircuitry was packed into the plastic case.

"A communication converter. Have you heard of them?"

"I—yes. I've heard."

"Good. I doubt that any of the savages have, although they are surprisingly well informed in certain respects. The device is not new or secret, but with galactic information flow as inadequate as it is, especially here on what was a sleepy backwater…Let me refresh your memory, sir. Substitute this device for the primary modulator in any energy weapon of the third or fourth class. The weapon will thereupon become a maser communicator, projecting the human voice to a considerable distance. I shall ask Admiral Cruz to order at least one of his orbital ships brought low and illuminated for the next several weeks, so that you may have a target to aim at. If you find yourself in an important concentration of the enemy's—where surely stolen energy weapons will be kept—and if you get an opportunity to call down a warcraft…Do you follow me?"

"But," Ridenour stammered. "But. How?"

"As mayor, I knew that such devices were included in the last consignment of defensive materials that the Navy sent to Domkirk. I knew that one was carried on every military aircraft of ours. And several military aircraft were among those stolen last night. I watched my chance, I made myself ridiculous, and—" Uriason threw out his chest, thereby also throwing out his belly—"at the appropriate moment, I palmed this one from beneath the noses of the wrecking crew."

Ridenour wet his lips. They felt sandpapery. "I could've guessed that much," he got out. "But me—I—how—"

"It would not be in character for me to accompany the savages into their wilderness," Uriason said.

“They would be entirely too suspicious. Can I, can Freehold, can His Majesty and the entire human species rely upon you, sir?”

The man was short and fat. His words rose like hot-air balloons. Nevertheless, had he dared under possible observation, Ridenour would have bowed most deeply. As matters were, the Terran could just say, “Yes, Citizen Mayor, I’ll try to do my best.”

These were the stages of their journey:

Karlsarm walked beside Ridenour, amicably answering questions. But wariness crouched behind. He wasn’t altogether convinced that this man’s reasons for coming along were purely scientific and diplomatic. At least, he’d better not be, yet. Sometimes he thought that humans from the inner Empire were harder to fathom than most nonhumans. Being of the same species, talking much the same language, they ought to react in the same ways as your own people. And they didn’t. The very facial expressions, a frown, a smile, were subtly foreign.

Ridenour, for immediate example, was courteous, helpful, even genial: but entirely on the surface. He showed nothing of his real self. No doubt he loved his family and was loyal to his Emperor and enjoyed his work and was interested in many other aspects of reality. He spoke of such things. But the emotion didn’t come through. He made no effort to share his feelings, rather he kept them to himself with an ease too great to be conscious.

Karlsarm had encountered the type before, offplanet. He speculated that reserve was more than an aristocrat’s idea of good manners; it was a defense. Jammed together with billions of others, wired from before birth into a network of communication, coordination, impersonal omnipotent social machinery, the human being could only protect his individuality by making his inner self a fortress. Here, in the outback of Freehold, you had room; neither people nor organizations pressed close upon you; if anything, you grew eager for intimacy. Karlsarm felt sorry for Terrans. But that did not help him understand or trust them.

“You surprise me pleasantly,” he remarked. “I didn’t expect you’d keep up with us the way you do.”

“Well, I try to stay in condition,” Ridenour said. “And remember, I’m used to somewhat higher gravity. But to be honest, I expected a far more difficult trip narrow muddly trails and the like. You have a road here.”

“Hm, I don’t think a lot of it. We do better elsewhere. But then, this is a distant marchland for us.”

Both men glanced around. The path crossed a high hillside, smoothly graded and switchbacked, surface planted in a mossy growth so tough and dense that no weeds could force themselves in. (It was a specially bred variety which, among other traits, required traces of manganese salt. Maintenance gangs supplied this from time to time, and thus automatically kept the moss within proper bounds.) The path was narrow, over-arched by forest, a sun-speckled cool corridor where birds whistled and a nearby cataract rang. Because of its twistings, few other people were visible, though the party totalled hundreds.

Most of them were on different courses anyhow. Karlsarm had explained that the Free People laid out as many small, interconnected, more or less parallel ways as the traffic in a given area demanded, rather than a single broad highroad. It was easier to do, less damaging to ecology and scenery, more flexible to changing situations. Also, it was generally undetectable from above. He had not seen fit to mention the other mutant plant types, sown throughout this country, whose exudates masked those of human metabolism and thereby protected his men from airborne chemical sniffers.

“I’ve heard you use beasts of burden in a limited fashion,” Ridenour said.

“Yes, horses and stathas have been naturalized here,” Karlsarm said. “And actually, in our central regions, we keep many. City folk see just a few, because we don’t often bring them to our thinly populated borderlands. No reason for it. You can go about as fast on foot, when you aren’t overloaded with gear. But at home you’ll see animals, wagons—boats and rafts, for that matter—in respectable totals.”

“Your population must be larger than is guessed, then.”

“I don’t know what the current guess is in the Cities. And we don’t bother with, uh, a census. But I’d estimate twenty million of us on this continent, and about the same for the others. Been stable for a long time. That’s the proper human density. We don’t crowd each other or press hard on natural resources. And so we’ve got abundant free food and stuff. No special effort involved in satisfying the basic needs. At the same time, there are enough of us for specialization, diversity, large-scale projects like road building. And, I might add, gifted people. You know, only about ten per cent of mankind are born to be leaders or creators in any degree. We’d stagnate if we were too few, same as we’d grow cramped and over-regulated if we became too many.”

“How do you maintain a level population? You don’t appear to have any strong compulsion mechanism.”

“No, we haven’t. Tradition, public opinion, the need to help your neighbor so he’ll help you, the fact that out-and-out bastards get into quarrels and eventually get killed—such factors will do, when you have elbow room. The population-control device is simple. It wasn't planned, it evolved, but it works. Territory."

"Beg pardon?"

"A man claims a certain territory for his own, to support him and his family and retainers. He passes it on to one son. How he chooses the heir is his business. Anybody who kills the owner, or drives him off, takes over that parcel of land."

Ridenour actually registered a little shock, though he managed a smile. "Your society is less idyllic than some young City people told me," he said.

Karlsarm laughed. "We do all right—most of us. Can any civilization claim more? The landless don't starve, remember. They're taken on as servants, assistants, guards and the like. Or they become itinerant laborers, or entrepreneurs, or something. Let me remind you, we don't practice marriage. Nobody needs to go celibate. It's only that few women care to have children by a landless man." He paused. "Territorial battles aren't common any more, either. The landholders have learned how to organize defenses. Besides, a decent man can count on help from his neighbors. So not many vagabonds try to reave an estate. Those that do, and succeed—well, haven't they proven they're especially fit to become fathers?"

The paths ranged above timberline. The land became boulder-strewn, chill and stark. Ridenour exclaimed, "But this road's been blasted from the cliff-side!"

"Why, of course," said Rowlan. "You didn't think we'd chip it out by hand, did you?"

"But what do you use for such jobs?"

“Organics. Like nitroglycerine. We compound that—doesn’t take much apparatus, you know—and make dynamite from it. Some other explosives, and most fuels, we get from vegetables we’ve bred.” Rowlan tugged his gray beard and regarded the Terran. “If you want to make a side trip,” he offered, “I’ll show you a hydroelectric plant. You’ll call it ridiculously small, but it beams power to several mills and an instrument factory. We are not ignorant, John Ridenour. We adopt from your civilization what we can use. It simply doesn’t happen to be a particularly large amount.”

Even in this comparatively infertile country, food was plentiful. There were no more fruits for the plucking, but roots and berries were almost as easily gotten in the low brush, and animals—albeit of different species from the lowlands—continued to arrive near camp for slaughter. Ridenour asked scholarly little Noach how that was done, he being a beast operator himself. “Are they domesticated and conditioned?”

“No, I wouldn’t call them that, exactly,” Noach replied. “Not like horses or dogs. We use the proper stimuli on them. Those vary, depending on what you’re after and where you are. For instance, in Brenning Dales you can unstopper a bottle of sex attractant, and every gruntleboar within ten kilometers rushes straight toward your bow. Around the Mare we’ve bred instincts into certain species to come when a sequence of notes is played on a trumpet. If nothing else, you can always stalk for yourself, any place. Hunting isn’t difficult when critters are abundant. We don’t want to take the time on this journey, though, so Mistress Jenith has been driving those cragbuck with her fire bees.” He shrugged. “There are plenty of other ways. What you don’t seem to realize, as yet, is that we’re descended from people who applied scientific method to the problem of living in a wilderness.”

For once, the night was clear above Foulweather Pass. Snow glistened on surrounding peaks, under Selene, until darkness lay drenched with an unreal brilliance. Not many stars shone through. But Karlsarm scowled at one, which was new and moved visibly, widdershins over his head.

“They’ve put up another satellite.” The words puffed ghost white from his lips; sound was quickly lost, as if it froze and tinkled down onto the hoar-frosted road. “Or moved a big spaceship into near orbit without camouflage. Why?”

“The war?” Evagail shivered beside him and wrapped her fur cloak tighter about her. (It was not her property. Warm outfits were kept for travelers in a shed at the foot of the pass, to be returned on the other side, with a small rental paid to the servant of the landholder.) “What’s been happening?”

“The news is obscure, what I get of it on that mini-radio we took along,” Karlsarm said. “A major fight’s developing near Sluicegate. Nuclear weapons, the whole filthy works. By Oneness, if this goes on much longer we won’t be left with a planet worth inhabiting!”

“Now don’t exaggerate.” She touched his hand. “I grant you, territory’s that’s fought on, or suffers fallout, is laid waste. But not forever; and it isn’t any big percentage of the total.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you were the owner. And what about the ecological consequences? The genetic? Let’s not get overconfident about these plant and animal species we’ve modified to serve our needs while growing wild. They’re still new and unstable. A spreading mutation could wipe them out. Or we might have to turn farmers to save them!”

“I know. I know. I do want you to see matters in perspective. But agreed, the sooner the war ends, the better.” Evagail turned her gaze from that sinister, crawling spark in the sky. She looked down the slope on which they stood, to the camp. Oilwood fires were strewn along the way, each economically serving a few people. They twinkled like red and orange constellations. A burst of laughter, a drift of song came distantly to her ears.

Karlsarm could practically read her thought. “Very well, what about Ridenour?” he challenged.

“I can’t say. I talk with him, but he’s so locked into himself, I get no hint of what his real purpose may be. I could almost wish my Skill were of the love kind.”

“Why yours?” Karlsarm demanded. “Why don’t you simply wish, like me, that we had such a Mistress with us?”

Evagail paused before she chuckled. “Shall I admit the truth? He attracts me. He’s thoroughly a man, in his quiet way; and he’s exotic and mysterious to boot. Must you really sic an aphrodite onto him when we reach Moon Garnet?”

“I’ll decide that at the time. Meanwhile, you can help me decide and maybe catch forewarning of any plot against us. He can’t hide that he’s drawn to you. Use the fact.”

“I don’t like to. Men and women—of course, I mean women who don’t have that special Skill—they should give to each other, not take. I don’t even know if I could deceive him.”

“You can try. If he realizes and gets angry, what of it?” Beneath the shadowing carnivore headpiece, Karlsarm’s features turned glacier stern. “You have your duty.”

“Well…” Briefly, her voice was forlorn. “I suppose.” Then the wide smooth shoulders straightened. Moonfrost sparkled on a mane lifted high.

“It could be fun, too, couldn’t it?” She turned and walked from him.

Ridenour sat at one campfire, watching a dance. The steps were as intricate as the music that an improvised orchestra made. He seemed not only glad but relieved when Evagail seated herself beside him.

“Hullo,” she greeted. “Are you enjoying the spectacle?”

“Yes,” he said, “but largely in my professional capacity. I’m sure it’s high art, but the conventions are too alien for me.”

“Isn’t your business to unravel alien symbolisms?”

“In part. Trouble is, what you have here is not merely different from anything I’ve ever seen before. It’s extraordinarily subtle—obviously the product of a long and rigorous tradition. I’ve discovered, for instance, that your musical scale employs smaller intervals than any other human music I know of. Thus you make and use and appreciate distinctions and combinations that I’m not trained to hear.”

“I think you’ll find that’s typical,” Evagail said. “We aren’t innocent children of nature, we Free People. I suspect we elaborate our lives more, we’re fonder of complication, ingenuity, ceremoniousness, than Terra herself.”

“Yes, I’ve talked to would-be runaways from the Cities.”

She laughed. “Well, the custom is that we give recruits a tough apprenticeship. If they can’t get through that, we don’t want them. Probably they wouldn’t survive long. Not that life’s harder among us than in the Cities. In fact, we have more leisure. But life is altogether different here.”

“I’ve scarcely begun to grasp how different,” Ridenour said. “The questions are so many, I don’t know where to start.” A dancer leaped, his feather bonnet streaming in Selene light, flame light, and shadow. A flute twittered, a drum thuttered, a harp trilled, a bell rang, chords intertwining like ripple patterns on water. “What arts do you have besides…this?”

“Not architecture, or monumental sculpture, or murals, or multi-sense taping.” Evagail smiled. “Nothing that requires awkward masses. But we do have schools of—oh, scrimshaw, jewelry, weaving, painting and carvings, that sort of thing—and they are genuine, serious arts. Then drama, literature, cuisine…and things you don’t have—to call them contemplation, conversation, integration—but those are poor words.”

“What I can’t understand is how you can manage without those awkward masses,” Ridenour said. “For example, everyone seems to be literate. But what’s the use? What is there to read?”

“Why, we probably have more books and periodicals than you do. No electronics competing with them. One of the first things our ancestors did, when they started colonizing the outback in earnest, was develop plants with leaves that dry into paper and juice that makes ink. Many landholders keep a little printing press in the same shed as their other heavy equipment. It doesn’t need much metal, and wind or water can power it. Don’t forget, each area maintains schools. The demand for reading matter is a source of income—yes, we use iron and copper slugs for currency—and the transporters carry mail as well as goods.”

“How about records, though? Libraries? Computers? Information exchange?”

“I’ve never met anybody who collects books, the way some do in the Cities. If you want to look at a piece again, copies are cheap.” (Ridenour thought that this ruled out something he had always considered essential to a cultivated man—the ability to browse, to re-read on impulse, to be serendipitous among the shelves. However, no doubt these outbackers thought he was uncouth because he didn't know how to dance or to arrange a meteor-watching festival.) "Messages go speedily enough for our purposes. We don't keep records like you. Our mode of life doesn't require it. Likewise, we have quite a live technology, still developing. Yes, and a pure science. But they concentrate on areas of work that need no elaborate apparatus: the study of animals, for instance, and ways to control them."

Evagail leaned closer to Ridenour. No one else paid attention; they were watching the performance. "But do me a favor tonight, will you?" she asked.

"What? Why, certainly." His gaze drifted across the ruddy lights in her hair, the shadows under her cloak, and hastily away. "If I can."

"It's easy." She laid a hand over his. "Just for tonight, stop being a research machine. Make small talk. Tell me a joke or two. Sing me a Terran song, when they finish here. Or walk with me to look at the moon. Be human, John Ridenour…only a man…this little while."

West of the pass, the land became a rolling plateau. Again it was forested, but less thickly and with other trees than in the warm eastern valleys. The travelers met folk more often, as population grew denser; and these were apt to be mounted. Karlsarm didn't bother with animals. A human in good condition can log fifty kilometers a day across favorable terrain, without difficulty. Ridenour remarked, highly centralized empires were held together on ancient Terra with communication no faster than this.

Besides, the outbackers possessed them: not merely an occasional aircar for emergency use, but a functioning web. He broke into uncontrollable laughter when Evagail first explained the system to him.

"What's so funny?" She cocked her head. Though they were much together, to the exclusion of others, they still lacked mutual predictability. He might now be wearing outbacker garb and be darkened by Freehold's harsh sunlight and have let his beard grow because he found a diamond-edge razor too much trouble. But he remained a stranger.

"I'm sorry. Old saying." He looked around the glen where they stood. Trees were stately above blossom-starred grasses; leaves murmured in a cool breeze and smelled like spice. He touched a green tendril that curled over one trunk and looped to the next. "Grapevine telegraph!"

"But…well, I don't recognize your phrase, John, but that kind of plant does carry signals. Our ancestors went to a vast amount of work to create the type and sow and train it, over the entire mid-continent. I confess the signals don't go at light speed, only neural speed; and the channel isn't awfully broad—but it suffices for us."

"How do you, uh, activate it?"

"That requires a Skill. To send something, you'd go to the nearest node and pay the woman who lives there. She'd transmit."

Ridenour nodded. "I see. Actually, I've met setups on nonhuman planets that aren't too different from this." He hesitated. "What do you mean by a Skill?"

"A special ability, inborn, cultivated, disciplined. You've watched Skills in action on our route, haven't you?"

"I'm not certain. You see, I'm barely starting to grasp the pattern of your society. Before, everything was a jumble of new impressions. Now I observe meaningful differences between this and that. Take our friend Noach, for one, with his spying quasi-weasels; or Karlsarm and the rest, who use birds for couriers. Do they have Skills?"

“Of course not. I suppose you might say their animals do. That is, the creatures have been bred to semi-intelligence. They have the special abilities and instincts, the *desire,* built into their chromosomes. But as for the men who use them, no, all they have is training in language and handling. Anybody could be taught the same.”

Ridenour looked at her, where she stood like a lioness in the filtered green light, stillness and strange odors at her back. “Only women have Skills, then,” he said finally.

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Why? Were they bred too?”

“No.” Astonishingly, she colored. “Whatever we may do with other men, we seldom become pregnant by anyone but a landholder. We want our children to have a claim on him. But somehow, women seem able to do more with hormones and pheromones. A biologist tried to explain why, but I couldn’t follow him terribly well. Let’s say the female has a more complex biochemistry, more closely involved with her psyche, than a male. Not that any woman can handle any materials. In fact, those who can do something with them are rare. When identified, in girlhood, they’re carefully trained to use what substances they can.”

“How?”

“It depends. A course of drugs may change the body secretions… delicately; you wouldn’t perceive any difference; but someone like Mistress Jenith will never be stung by her fire bees. Rather, they’ll always live near her. And she has ways to control them, make them go where she commands and—No, I don’t know how. Each Skill keeps its secrets. But you must know how. Each few parts per million in the air will lure insects for kilometers around, to come and mate. Other insects, social ones, use odor signals to coordinate their communities. Man himself lives more by trace chemicals than he realizes. Think how little of some drugs is needed to change his metabolism, even his personality. Think how some smells recall a past scene to you, so vividly you might be there again. Think how it was proven, long ago, that like, dislike, appetite, fear, anger…every emotion…are conditioned by just such faint cues. Now imagine what can be done, as between a woman who knows precisely how to use those stimuli—some taken from bottles, some created at will by her own glands—between her and an organism bred to respond.”

“An Arulian concept?”

“Yes, we learned a lot from the Arulians,” Evagail said.

“They call you Mistress, I’ve heard. What’s your Skill?”

She lost gravity. Her grin was impudent. “You may find out one day. Come, let’s rejoin the march.” She took his hand. “Though we needn’t hurry,” she added.

As far as could be ascertained, Freehold had never been glaciated. The average climate was milder than Terra’s, which was one reason the outbackers didn’t need fixed houses. They moved about within their territories, following the game and the fruits of the earth, content with shelters erected here and there, or with bedrolls. By Ridenour’s standards, it was an austere life.

Or it had been. He found his canon gradually changing. The million sights, sounds, smells, less definable sensations of the wilderness, made a city apartment seem dead by contrast, no matter how many electronic entertainers you installed.

(Admittedly, the human kinds of fun were limited. A minstrel, a ball game, a chess game, a local legend, a poetry reading, were a little pallid to a man used to living at the heart of Empire. And while the outbackers could apparently do whatever they chose with drugs and hypnotism, so could the Terrans. Lickerish rumor had actually underrated their uninhibited inventiveness in other departments of pleasure. But you had only a finite number of possibilities there too, didn't you? And he wasn't exactly a young man any more, was he? And damn, but he missed Lissa! Also the children, of course, the tobacco he'd exhausted, friends, tall towers, the gentler daylight of Sol and familiar constellations after dark, the sane joys of scholarship and teaching: everything, everything.)

But life could not be strictly nomadic. Some gear was not portable, or needed protection. Thus, in each territory, at least one true house and several outbuildings had been erected, where the people lived from time to time.

Humans needed protection too. Ridenour found that out when he and Evagail were caught in a storm.

She had led him off the line of march to show him such a center. They had been enroute for an hour or two when she began casting uneasy glances at the sky. Clouds rose in the north, unbelievably high thunderheads with lightning in their blue-black depths. A breeze chilled and stiffened; the forest moaned. "We'd better speed up," she said at length. "Rainstorm headed this way."

"Well?" He no longer minded getting wet.

"I don't mean those showers we've had. I mean the real thing."

Ridenour gulped and matched her trot. He knew what kind of violence a deep, intensely irradiated atmosphere can breed. Karlsarm's folk must be hard at work, racing to chop branches and make rough roofs and walls for themselves. Two alone couldn't do it in time. They'd normally have sought refuge under a windfall or in a hollow trunk or anything else they found. But a house was obviously preferable.

The wind worsened. Being denser than Terra's, air never got to hurricane velocity; but it thrust remorselessly, a quasi-solid, well-nigh unbreathable mass. Torn-off leaves and boughs started to fly overhead, under a galloping black cloud wrack. Darkness thickened, save when lightning split the sky. Thunder, keenings, breakings and crashings, resounded through Ridenour's skull.

He had believed himself in good shape, but presently he was staggering. Any man must soon be exhausted, pushing against that horrible wind. Evagail, though, continued, easy of breath. *How?* he wondered numbly, before he lost all wonder in the cruel combat to keep running.

The first raindrops fell, enormous, driven by the tempest, stinging like gravel when they struck. You could be drowned in a flash flood, if you were not literally flayed by the hail that would soon come. Ridenour reeled toward unconsciousness—no, he was helped, Evagail upbore him, he leaned on her and—

And they reached the hilltop homestead.

It consisted of low, massive log-and-stone buildings, whose overgrown sod roofs would hardly be visible from above. Everything stood unlighted, empty. But the door to the main house opened at Evagail's touch; no place in the woodlands had a lock. She dragged Ridenour across the threshold and closed the door again. He lay in gloom and gasped his way back to consciousness. As if across lightyears, he heard her say, "We didn't arrive any too soon, did we?" There followed the cannonade of the hail.

After a while he was on his feet. She had stimulated the lamps, which were microcultures in glass globes, to their bright phosphorescence and had started a fire on the hearth. The principal heat source, however, was fuel oil, a system antique but adequate. “We might as well figure on spending the night,” she said from the kitchen. “This weather will last for hours, and the roads will be rivers for hours after that. Why don’t you find yourself a hot bath and some dry clothes? I’ll have dinner ready soon.”

Ridenour swallowed a sense of inadequacy. He wasn’t an outbacker and couldn’t be expected to cope with their country. How well would they do on Terra? Exploring, he saw the house to be spacious, many-roomed, beautifully paneled, draped and furnished. Evagail’s advice was sound. He returned to her as if reborn.

She had prepared an excellent meal out of what was in the larder, including a heady red wine. White tablecloth, crystal goblets, candlelight were almost a renaissance of a Terra which had been more gracious than today’s. (Almost. The utensils were horn, the knifeblades obsidian. The paintings on the walls were of a stylized, unearthly school; looking closely, you could identify Arulian influence. No music lilted from a taper; instead came the muffled brawling of the storm. And the woman who sat across from him wore a natural-fiber kilt, a fringed leather bolero, a dagger and tomahawk.)

They talked in animated and friendly wise, though since they’ belonged to alien cultures they had little more than question-and-answer conversation. The bottle passed freely back and forth. Being tired and having long abstained, Ridenour was quickly affected by the alcohol. When he noticed that, he thought, what the hell, why not? It glowed within him. “I owe you an apology,” he said. “I classed your people as barbarians. I see now you have a true civilization.”

"You needed this much time to see that?" she laughed. "Well, I'll forgive you. The Cities haven't realized it yet."

"That's natural. You're altogether strange to them. And, isolated as they are from the galactic mainstream, they…haven't the habit of thinking something different…can be equal or superior to what they take for granted is the civilized way."

"My, that was a sentence! Do you acknowledge, then, we are superior?"

He shook his head with care.

"No. I can't say that. I'm a city boy myself. A lot of what you do shocks me. Your ruthlessness. Your unwillingness to compromise."

She grew grave. "The Cities never tried to compromise with us, John. I don't know if they can. Our wise men, those who've studied history, say an industrial society must keep expanding or go under. We've got to stop them before they grow too strong. The war's given us a chance."

"You can't rebel against the Empire!" he protested.

"Can't we? We're a goodly ways from Terra. And we are rebelling. No one consulted us about incorporation." Evagail shrugged. "Not that we care about that in itself. What difference to us who claims the overlordship of Freehold, if he lets us alone? But the Cities have not let us alone. They cut down our woods, dam our rivers, dig holes in our soil, and get involved in a war that may wreck the whole planet."

"M-m, you could help end the war if you mobilized against the Arulians."

"To whose benefit? The Cities'!"

"But when you attack the Cities, aren't you aiding the Arulians?"

"No. Not in the long run. They belong to the Cities also. We don't want to fight them—our relationship with them was mostly pleasant, and they taught us a great deal—but eventually we want them off this world."

"You can't expect me to agree that's right."

"Certainly not." Her tone softened. "What we want from you is nothing but an honest report to your leaders. You don't know how happy I am that you admit we are civilized. Or post-civilized. At any rate, we aren't degenerate, we are progressing on our own trail. I can hope you'll go between us and the Empire, as a friend of both, and help work out a settlement. If you do that, you'll live in centuries of ballads: the Peacebringer."

"I'd like that better than anything," he said gladly.

She raised her brows. "Anything?"

"Oh, some things equally, no doubt. I am getting homesick."

"You needn't stay lonely while you're with us," she murmured.

Somehow, their hands joined across the table. The wine sang in Ridenour's veins. "I've wondered why you stood apart from me," she said. "Surely you could see I want to make love with you."

"Y-yes." His heart knocked.

"Why not? You have a...a wife, yes. But I can't imagine an Imperial Terran worries about that, two hundred lightyears from home. And what harm would be done her?"

"None."

She laughed anew, rose and circled the table to stand beside him and rumpled his hair. The odor of her was sweet around him. "All right, then, silly," she said, "what have you been waiting for?"

He remembered. She saw his fists clench and stepped back. He looked at the candle flames, not her, and mumbled: "I'm sorry. It mustn't be."

"Why not?" The wind raved louder, nearly obliterating her words.

"Let's say I do have idiotic medieval scruples,"

She regarded him for a space. "Is that the truth?"

"Yes." *But not the whole truth,* he thought. *I am not an observer, not an emissary, I am he who will call down destruction upon you if I can. The thing in my pocket sunders us, dear. You are my enemy, and I will not betray you with a kiss.*

"I'm not offended," she said at last, slowly. "Disappointed and puzzled, though."

"We probably don't understand each other as well as we believed," he ventured.

"Might be. Well, let's let the dishes wait and turn in, shall we?" Her tone was less cold than wary.

Next day she was polite but aloof, and after they had rejoined the army she conferred long with Karlsarm.

Moon Garnet Lake was the heart of the Upwoods: more than fifty kilometers across, walled on three sides by forest and on the fourth by soaring snowpeaks. At every season it was charged with life, fish in argent swarms, birds rising by thousands when a bulligator bellowed in a white-plumed stand of cockatoo reed, wildkine everywhere among the trees. At full summer, microphytons multiplied until the waters glowed deep red, and the food chain which they started grew past belief in size and diversity. As yet, the year was too new for that. Wavelets sparkled clear to the escarpments, where mountaintops floated dim blue against heaven.

"I see why you reacted violently against the attempt to found a town here," Ridenour said to Karlsarm. They stood on a beach, watching most of the expedition frolic in the lake. Those boisterous shouts and lithe brown bodies did not seem out of place; a cruising flock of fowl overhead was larger and made more clangor. The Terran drew a pure breath. “And it would have been a pity, esthetically speaking. Who owns this region?”

“None,” Karlsarm answered. “It’s too basic to the whole country. Anyone may use it. The numbers that do aren’t great enough to strain the resources, similar things being available all over. So it’s a natural site for our periodic head-of-household gatherings.” He glanced sideways at the other man and added: “Or for an army to rendezvous.”

“You are not disbanding, then?”

“Certainly not. Domkirk was a commencement. We don’t intend to stop till we control the planet.”

“But you’re daydreaming! No other City’s as vulnerably located as Domkirk was. Some are on other continents—”

“Where Free People also live. We’re in touch.”

“What do you plan?”

Karlsarm chuckled. “Do you really expect me to tell you?”

Ridenour made a rueful grin, but his eyes were troubled. “I don’t ask for military secrets. In general terms, however, what do you foresee?”

“A war of attrition,” Karlsarm said. “We don’t like that prospect either. It’ll taste especially sour to use biologicals against their damned agriculture. But if we must, we must. We have more land, more resources of the kind that count, more determination. And they can’t get at us. We’ll outgrind them.”

“Are you quite sure? Suppose you provoke them—or the Imperial Navy—into making a real effort. Imagine, say, one atomic bomb dropped into this lake.”

Anger laid tight bands around Karlsarm’s throat and chest, but he managed to answer levelly: “We have defenses. And means of retaliation. This is a keystone area for us. We won’t lose it without exacting a price—which I think they’ll find too heavy. Tell them that when you go home!”

“I shall. I don’t know if I’ll be believed. You appear to have no concept of the power that a single, minor-class spaceship can bring to bear. I beg you to make terms before it’s too late.”

“Do you aim to convince a thousand leaders like me and the entire society that elected us? I wish you luck, John Ridenour.” Karlsarm turned from the pleading gaze. “I’d better get busy. We’re still several kilometers short of our campsite.”

His brusqueness was caused mainly by doubt of his ability to dissemble much longer. What he, with some experience of Imperialists, sensed in this one’s manner, lent strong support to the intuitive suspicions that Evagail had voiced. Ridenour had more on his mind than the Terran admitted.

It was unwise to try getting the truth out of him with drugs. He might be immunized or counter-conditioned. Or his secret might turn out to be something harmless. In either case, a potentially valuable spokesman would have been antagonized for nothing.

An aphrodite? She’d boil the ice water in his veins, for certain! And, while possessors of that Skill were rare, several were standing by at present in case they should be needed on some intelligence mission.

It might not work, either. But the odds were high that it would. Damned few men cared for anything but the girl—the woman—the hag—whatever her age, whatever her looks—once she had turned her pheromones loose on him. She could ask what she would as the price of her company. But Ridenour might belong to that small percentage who, otherwise normal, were so intensely inner-directed that it didn't matter how far in love they fell; they'd stick by their duty. Should this prove the case he could not be allowed to leave and reveal the existence of that powerful a weapon. He must be killed, which was repugnant, or detained, which was a nuisance.

Karlsarm's brain labored on, while he issued his orders and led the final march. Ridenour probably did not suspect that he was suspected. He likeliest interpreted Evagail's avoidance of him as due to pique, despite what she had claimed. (And in some degree it no doubt is, Karlsarm snickered to himself.) Chances were he attributed the chief 's recent gruffness to preoccupation. He had circulated freely among, the other men and women of the force; but not having been told to doubt his good faith, they did not and he must realize it.

Hard to imagine what he might do. He surely did not plan on access to an aircar or a long-range radio transmitter! Doubtless he'd report anything he had seen or heard that might have military significance. But he wouldn't be reporting anything that made any difference.

Well before he was conducted to the agrolands, the army would have left Moon Garnet again; and it would not return, because the lake was too precious to use for a permanent base. And all this had been made explicit to Ridenour at the outset. Well, then, why not give him free rein and see what he did? Karlsarm weighed risks and gains for some time before he nodded to himself.

The encampment was large. A mere fraction of the Upwoods men had gone to Domkirk. Thousands stayed behind, training. They greeted their comrades with envious hilarity. Fires burned high that night, song and dance and clinking goblets alarmed the forest.

At sunset, Karlsarm and Evagail stood atop a rocky bluff, overlooking water and trees and a northward rise to the camp. Behind them was a cave, from which projected an Arulian howitzer. Several other heavy-duty weapons were placed about the area, and a rickety old war boat patrolled overhead. Here and there, a man flitted into view, bow or blade on shoulder, and vanished again into the brake. Voices could be heard, muted by leaves, and smoke drifted upward. But the signs of man were few, virtually lost in that enormous landscape. With the enemy hundreds of kilometers off, guns as well as picketposts were untended; trees divided the little groups of men from each other and hid them from shore or sky; the evening was mostly remote bird cries and long golden light.

“I wonder what our Terran thinks of this,” Karlsarm said. “We must look pretty sloppy to him.”

“He’s no fool. He doesn’t underrate us much. Maybe not at all.” Evagail shivered, though the air was yet warm. Her hand crept into his, her voice grew thin. “Could he be right? Could we really be foredoomed?”

“I don’t know,” Karlsarm said. She started. The hazel eyes widened. “Loveling! You are always—”

“I can be honest with you,” he said. “Ridenour accused me today of not understanding what power the Imperialists command in a single combat unit. He was wrong. I’ve seen them and I do understand. We can’t force terms on them. If they decide the Cities must prevail, well, we’ll give them a hard guerrilla war, but we’ll be hunted down in the end. Our aim has to be to convince them it isn’t worthwhile—that, at the least, their cheapest course of action is to arrange and enforce a status quo settlement between us and the Cities." He laughed. "Whether or not they'll agree remains to be seen. But we've got to try, don't we?"

"Do we?"

"Either that or stop being the Free People."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "Let's not spend the night in this hole," she begged. "Not with that big ugly gun looming over us. Let's take our bedrolls into the forest."

"I'm sorry. I must stay here."

"Why?"

"So Noach can find me...if his animals report anything."

Karlsarm woke before the fingers had closed on his arm to shake him. He sat up. The cave was a murk, relieved by a faint sheen off the howitzer; but the entrance cut a blue-black starry circle in it. Noach crouched silhouetted. "He lay awake the whole night," the handler breathed. "Now he's sneaked off to one of the blaster cannon. He's fooling around with it."

Karlsarm heard Evagail gasp at his side. He slipped weapon belts and quiver strap over the clothes he had slept in, took his crossbow and glided forth. "We'll see about that," he said. Anger stood bleak within him. "Lead on." Silent though they were, slipping from shadow, he became aware of the woman at his back.

Selene was down, sunrise not far off, but the world still lay nighted, sky powdered with stars and lake gleaming like a mirror. An uhu wailed, off in the bulk of the forest. The air was cold. Karlsarm glanced aloft. Among the constellations crept that spark which had often haunted his thoughts. The orbit he estimated from angular speed was considerable. Therefore the thing was big. And if the Imperialists had erected some kind of space station, the grapevine would have brought news from the Free People's spies inside the Cities; therefore the thing was a spaceship—huge. Probably the light cruiser *Isis:* largest man-of-war the Terrans admitted keeping in this system. (Quite enough for their purposes. A heavier craft couldn't land if needed. This one could handle any probable combination of lesser vessels. If Aruli sent something more formidable, the far-flung scoutboats would detect that in time to arrange reinforcements from a Navy base before the enemy arrived. Which was ample reason to expect that Aruli would not "intervene in a civil conflict, though denouncing this injustice visited upon righteously struggling kinfolk.")

Was it coincidence that she took her new station soon after Ridenour joined the raiders? Tonight we find out, Karlsarm vowed.

The blaster cannon stood on a bare ridge, barrel etched gaunt across the Milky Way. His group crouched under the last tree and peered. One of Noach's beasts could go unobserved among the scattered bushes, but not a man. And the beasts weren't able to describe what went on at the controls of a machine.

"Could he—"

Karlsarm chopped off Evagail's whisper with a hiss. The gun was in action. He saw the thing move through a slow arc and heard the purr of its motor. It was tracking. But what was it locked onto? And why had no energy bolt stabbed forth? "He's not fixing to shoot up the camp," Karlsarm muttered. "That'd be ridiculous. He couldn't get off more than two shots before he was dead. But what else?"

"Should I rush?" Evagail asked.

"I think you'd better," Karlsarm said, "and let's hope the damage hasn't already been done."

He must endure the agony of a minute or two while she gathered the resources of her Skill—not partially, as she often did in everyday life, but totally. He heard a measured intake of breath, sensed rhythmic muscular contractions, smelled sharp adrenalin. Then she exploded.

She was across the open ground in a blur. Ridenour could not react before she was upon him. He cried out and ran. She overhauled him in two giantess bounds. Her hands closed. He struggled, and he was not a weak man. But she picked him up by the wrists and ankles and carried him like a rag doll. Her face was a white mask in the starlight. "Lie still," she said in a voice not her own, "or I will break you."

"Don't. Evagail, please." Noach dared stroke an iron-hard arm. "Do be careful," he said to Ridenour's aghast upside-down stare. "She's dangerous in this condition. It's akin to hysterical rage, you know—mobilization of the body's ultimate resources, which are quite astounding—but under conscious control. Nevertheless, the personality is affected. Think of her as an angry catavray."

"Amok," rattled in Ridenour's throat. "Berserk." He shivered.

"I don't recognize those words," Noach said, "but I repeat, her Skill consists in voluntary hysteria. At the moment, she could crush your skull between her hands. She might do it, too, if you provoke her."

They reached the gun. Evagail cast the Terran to earth, bone-rattlingly hard, and yanked him back on his feet by finger and thumb around his nape. He was taller than she, but she appeared to tower over him, over all three men. Starlight crackled in her coiled hair. Her eyes were bright and blind.

Noach leaned close to Ridenour, read the terror upon him, and said mildly, "Please tell us what you were doing."

In some incredible fashion, Ridenour got the nerve to yell, “Nothing! I couldn’t sleep, I c-came here to pass the time—”

Karlsarm turned from his examination of the blaster. “You’ve got this thing tracking that ship in orbit,” he said.

“Yes. I—foolish of me—I apologize—only for fun—”

“You had the trigger locked,” Karlsarm said. “Energy was pouring out of the muzzle. But no flash, no light, no ozone smell.” He gestured. “I turned it off. I also notice you’ve opened the chamber and replaced the primary modulator with this little gadget. Did you hear him talk, Evagail, before you charged?”

Her strange flat tone said: “‘—entire strength of the outbacker army on this continent is concentrated here and plans to remain for several days at least. I don’t suggest a multi-megatonner. It’d annihilate them, all right, but they *are* subjects of His Majesty and potentially more valuable than most. It’d also do great ecological damage—to Imperial territory—and City hinterlands would get fallout. Not to mention the effect on your humble servant, me. But a ship could land without danger. I suggest the *Isis* herself, loaded with marines, aircraft and auxiliary gear. If the descent is sudden, the guerrillas won’t be able to flee far. Using defoliators, sonics, gas, stun-beam sweeps and the rest, you should be able to capture most of them inside a week or two. Repeat, capture, not kill, wherever possible. I’ll explain after you land. Right now, I don’t know how long I’ve got till I’m interrupted, so I’d better describe terrain. We’re on the northeast verge of Moon Garnet Lake—’ At that point,” Evagail concluded, “I interrupted him.” The most chilling thing was that she saw no humor.

“Her Skill heightens perceptions and data storage too,” Noach said in a shocked, mechanical fashion.

"Well," Karlsarm sighed, "no real need to interrogate Ridenour, is there? He converted this gun into some kind of maser and called down the enemy on our heads."

"They may not respond, if they heard him cut off the way he was," Noach said with little hope.

"Wasn't much noise," Karlsarm answered. "They probably figure he did see somebody coming and had to stop in a hurry. If anything, they'll arrive as fast as may be, before we can disperse the stockpiles that'll give a scent to their metal detectors."

"We'd better start running," Noach said. Above the bristly beard, his nutcracker face, had turned old.

"Maybe not." Excitement rose in Karlsarm.

"I need at least an hour or two to think—and, yes, talk with you, Ridenour."

The Terran straightened. His tone rang. "I didn't betray you, really," he said. "I stayed loyal to my Emperor."

"You'll tell us a few things, though," Karlsarm said. "Like what procedure you expect a landing party to follow. No secrets to that, are there? Just tell us about newscasts you've seen, books you've read, inferences you've made."

"No!"

Roused by the noise, other men were drifting up the hill, lean leather-clad shapes with weapons to hand. But Karlsarm ignored them. "Evagail," he said.

Her cold, cold fingers closed on Ridenour. He shrieked. "Slack off," Karlsarm ordered. "Now—*slack off, woman!*—have you changed your mind? Or does she unscrew your ears, one by one, and other parts? I don't want you hurt, but my whole civilization's at stake, and I haven't much time."

Ridenour broke. Karlsarm did not despise him for that. Few men indeed could have defied Evagail in her present mood, and they would have had to be used to the Mistresses of War.

In fact, Karlsarm needed a lot of courage himself, later on, when he laid arms around her and mouth at her cheek and crooned, "Come back to us, loveling." How slowly softness, warmth and—in a chill dawn-light—color reentered her skin: until at last she sank down before him and wept.

He raised her and led her to their cave.

*****

At first the ship was a gleam, drowned in sun-glare. Then she was a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. But swiftly and swiftly did she grow. Within minutes, her shadow darkened the land. Men saw her from below as a tower that descended upon them, hundreds of meters in height, flanks reflecting with a metallic brilliance that blinded. Through light filters might be seen the boat housings, gun turrets and missile tubes that bristled from her. She was not heavily armored, save at a few key points, for she dealt in nuclear energies and nothing could withstand a direct hit. But the perceptors and effectors of her fire-control system could intercept virtually anything that a lesser mechanism might throw. And the full power of her own magazines, vomited forth at once, would have incinerated a continent.

The engines driving that enormous mass were deathly quiet. But where their countergravity fields touched the planet, trees snapped to kindling and the lake roiled white. Her advent was dancer graceful. But it went so fast that cloven air roared behind, one continuous thunderclap between stratosphere and surface. Echoes crashed from mountain to mountain; avalanches broke loose on the heights, throwing ice plumes into the sky; the risen winds smelled scorched.

Emblazoned upon her stood *HMS Isis* and the sunburst of chastising Empire.

Already she had discharged her auxiliaries, aircraft that buzzed across the lakeland in bright quick swarms, probing with instruments, firing random lightning bolts, shouting through amplifiers that turned human voices into an elemental force: "Surrender, surrender!"

At the nexus of the cruiser's multiple complexity, Captain Chang sat in his chair of command. The screens before him flickered with views, data, reports. A score of specialist officers held to their posts behind him. Their work—speech, tap on signal buttons, clickdown of switches—made a muted buzz. From time to time, something was passed up to Chang himself. He listened, decided and returned to studying the screens. Neither his inflection nor his expression varied. Lieutenant-Commander Hunyadi, his executive officer, punched an appropriate control on the communications board in front of him and relayed the order to the right place. The bridge might have been an engineering center on Terra, save for the uniforms and the straining concentration.

Until Chang scowled. "What's that, Citizen Hunyadi?" He pointed to a screen in which the water surface gleamed, amidst green woods and darkling cliffs. The view was dissolving.

"Fog rising, sir, I think." Hunyadi had already tapped out a query to the meteorological officer in his distant sanctum.

“No doubt, Citizen Hunyadi,” Chang said. “I do not believe it was predicted. Nor do I believe it is precedented—such rapid condensation—even on this freak planet.”

The M.O.’s voice came on. Yes, the entire target area was fogging at an unheard-of rate. No, it had not been forecast and, frankly, it was not understood. Possibly, at this altitude, given this pressure gradient, high insolation acted synergistically with the colloidogenic effect of countergravity beams on liquid. Should the question be addressed to a computer?

“No, don’t tie facilities up on an academic problem,” Chang said. “Will the stuff be troublesome?”

“Not very, sir. In fact, aircraft reports indicate it’s forming a layer at about five hundred meters. An overcast, should be reasonably clear at ground level. Besides, we have instruments that can see through fog.”

“I am aware of that latter fact, Citizen Nazarevsky. What concerns me is that an overcast will hide us from visual observation at satellite distance. You will recall that picket ships are supposed to keep an eye on us.” Chang drummed fingers on the arm of his chair for a second before he said: “No matter. We will still have full communication, I trust. And it’s necessary to exploit surprise, before the bandits have scattered over half this countryside. Carry on, gentlemen.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Hunyadi returned to the subtle, engrossing ballet that was command operations.

After a while, Chang stirred himself and asked, “Has any evidence been reported of enemy willingness to surrender?”

“No, sir,” the exec replied. “But they don’t appear to be marshalling for resistance, either. I don’t mean just that they haven’t shot at us. The stockpiles of metallic stuff that we’re zeroing in on haven’t been moved. Terrain looks deserted. Every topographical and soni-probe indication is that it’s normal, safe, not booby-trapped.”

“I wish Ridenour had been able to transmit more,” Chang complained. “Well, no doubt the bandits are simply running in panic. I wonder if they stopped to cut his throat.”

Hunyadi understood that no answer was desired from him.

The ship passed through the new-born clouds. Uncompensated viewports showed thick, swirling gray formlessness. Infrared, ultraviolet and microwave scopes projected a peaceful scene beneath. It was true that an unholy number of tiny flying objects were registered in the area. Insects, no doubt, probably disturbed by the ship. Time was short in which to think about them, before *Isis* broke through. Ground was now immediately below: that slope on the forest edge, overlooking the lake and near the enemy weapon depots, which Chang had selected. It would have been a lovely sight, had the sky not been so low and gloomy, the tendrils and banks of fog drifting so many and stealthy among trees. But everyone on *Isis* was too busy to admire, from the master in his chair of command to the marines ranked before the sally locks.

Aircraft that had landed for final checks of the site flew away like autumn leaves. The cruiser hung until they were gone, extending her landing jacks, which were massive as cathedral buttresses. Then slowly she sank down upon them. For moments the engines loudened, ringing through her metal corridors. Words flew, quiet and tense: “—stability achieved…air cover complete…weapons crew standing by…detectors report negative…standing by…standing by…standing by…”

“Proceed with Phase Two,” Chang ordered.

“Now hear this,” Hunyadi chanted to the all-points intercom. The engines growled into silence. The airlocks opened. Inhuman in helmets, body armor, flying harness, the weapons they clutched, the marine squadrons rushed forth. First they would seize the guerrilla arsenals, and next cast about for human spoor.

The bridge had not really fallen still. Data continued to flow in, commands to flow out; but by comparison, sound was now a mutter, eerie as the bodies of fog that moved out of undertree shadows and across the bouldery hillside. Hunyadi looked into the screens and grimaced. “Sir,” he said uneasily, “if the enemy’s as skilled in moving about through the woods as I’ve heard, someone could come near enough to fire a small nuclear missile at us.”

“Have no worries on that score, Citizen Hunyadi,” Chang said. “Nothing material, launched from a projector that one or two men might carry, could reach us before it was detected and intercepted. A blaster beam might scorch a hull plate or two. But upper and lower gun turrets would instantly triangulate on the source.” His tone was indulgent: like most Navy men serving on capital ships, Hunyadi was quite new to ground operations. “Frankly, I could hope for a show of resistance. The alternative is a long, tedious airborne bushbeating.”

Hunyadi winced. “Hunting men like animals. I don’t like it.”

“Nor I,” Chang admitted. The iron came back into him. “But we have our orders.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Read your history, Citizen Hunyadi. Read your history. No empire which tolerated rebellion ever endured long thereafter. And we are the wall between humanity and Merseian—”

A scream broke through.

And suddenly war was no problem in logistics, search patterns, or games theory. It entered the ship with pain in one hand and blood on the other; and its footfalls thundered.

“Bees, millions of things like bees, out of the woods—oh, God, coming inboard, the boys’re doubled over, one sting hurts enough to knock you crazy—Yaaahhhh!”

“Close all locks! Seal all compartments! All hands in spacesuits!”

“Marine Colonel Deschamps to Prime Command. Detachments report small groups of women, unarmed, as they land Women appear anxious to surrender. Request orders.”

“Take them prisoners, of course. Stand around them. You may not be attacked then. But if a unit notes a dense insect swarm, the men are to seal their armor and discharge lethal gas at once.”

“Lock Watch Four to bridge! We can’t shut the lock here! Some enormous animal—like a, a nightmare crocodile—burst in from the woods—blocking the valves with its body—”

“Energy weapons, sweep the surrounding forest. All aircraft, return to bomb and strafe this same area.”

Atomic warheads and poisons could not be used, when the ship would be caught in their blast or the gases pour in through three airlocks jammed open by slain monsters. But some gunners had buttoned up their turrets in advance of the bees. Their cannon hurled bolt after bolt, trees exploded and burned and fell, rocks fused…and fog poured in like an ocean.

Simultaneously, the instrumentation and optical aids that should have pierced it failed. The crews must fire at random into horrible wet smoke, knowing they could not cover the whole ground about them.

"Radio dead. Radar dead. Electromagnetic 'scopes dead. Blanketed by interference. Appears to emanate from…from everywhere…different insects, clouds of them! What scanning stuff we've got that still works, sonics, that kind of thing, gives insufficient definition. We're deaf, dumb, and blind!"

Aircraft began to crash. Their instruments were likewise gone; and they were not meant to collide with entire flocks of birds.

"Marine Colonel Deschamps—reporting—reports received—catastrophe. I don't know what, except…those women…they turned on our men and—"

Troopers who escaped flew wildly through fog. Birds found them and betrayed them to snipers in treetops. They landed, seeking cover. Arrows whistled from brush, or hellhounds fell upon them.

"Stand by to raise ship."

"Lock Watch Four reporting—they've got in through the fog, under our fire—swarming in, wild men and animals—good-by, Maria, goodby, universe—"

Most aircraft pilots managed to break free. They got above the clouds and ran from that lake. But they were not equipped to evade ground fire of energy weapons with which there was no electronic interference such as continued to plague them. It had been assumed that the marines would take those emplacements. The marines were now dead, or disabled, or fleeing, or captured. The women called their men back to the guns. Stars blossomed and fell through the daylight sky.

“This is Wolf, commanding the Free People group assigned to HMS Isis*. A prisoner tells me this thing communicates with the bridge. Better give up, Captain. We’re inside. We hold the engine room. We can take your whole ship at our leisure—or plant a nuclear bomb. Your auxiliary forces are rapidly being destroyed I hope you’ll see reason and give up. We don’t want to harm you. It’s no discredit to you, sir, this defeat. Your intelligence service let you down. You met weapons you didn’t know about, uniquely suited to very special circumstances. Tell your men to lay down their arms. We’ll lift the interference blanket if you agree—not skyward, but on ground level, anyhow, so you can call them. Let’s stop spilling lives and begin talking terms.”*

Chang felt he had no choice.

Soon afterward, he and his principal officers stood outside. The men who guarded them were clad and equipped like savages; but they spoke with courtesy. “I would like you gentlemen to meet some friends,” said the one named Karlsarm. From the forest, toward the captured flying tower, walked a number of women. They were more beautiful than could be imagined.

Ridenour was among the last to go aboard. Not that there were many—a skeleton staff of chosen Imperialist officers, for the aphrodites could not make captives of more in the short time available, those women themselves, whoever of the army possessed abilities even slightly useful in space warship. But perhaps the measure of Karlsarm’s audacity was his drafting of a known spy.

Whose loyalties had not been altered.

Standing in cold, blowing fogbanks, Ridenour shuddered. The cruiser was dim to his eyes, her upper sections lost. Water soaked the earth and dripped from a thousand unseen trees; the insects that made this weather flitted ceaselessly between lake and air, in such myriads that their wingbeats raised an underlying sussuration; a wild beast bellowed, a wild bird shrilled—tones of the wilderness. But the outback reaches were not untamed nature. Like some great animal, they had been harnessed for man, and in turn, something of theirs had entered the human heart.

A Terran went up a gangway, into the ship. His uniform was still neat blue, emblemmed with insignia and sunburst. He still walked with precision. But his eyes scarcely left the weather-beaten, leather-kilted woman at his side, though she must be twenty years his senior.

“There but for the grace of God,” Ridenour whispered.

Evagail, who had appeared mutely a few minutes ago, gave him a serious look. “Is their treatment so dreadful?” she asked.

“What about their people at home? Their home itself? Their own shame and self-hate for weakness—” Ridenour broke off.

“They’ll be released…against their wills, I’m sure; they’ll plead to stay with us. You can make it part of your job to see that their superiors understand they couldn’t help themselves. Afterward, you have reconditioning techniques, don’t you? Though I expect most cases will recover naturally. They’ll have had just a short exposure.”

“And the, the women?”

“Why, what of them? They don’t want to be saddled with a bunch of city-men. This is their wartime duty. Otherwise they have their private affairs.”

“Their Skills.” Ridenour edged away from her.

Her smile was curiously timid. “John,” she said, “we’re not monsters. We’re only the Free People. An aphrodite doesn’t use her Skill for unfair gain. It has therapeutic applications. Or I—I don't like raising my strength against fellow humans. I want to use it for their good again."

He fumbled out the tobacco he had begged from a Terran and began to stuff his pipe. It would give some consolation.

Her shoulders slumped. "Well," she said in a tired voice, "I think we'd better go aboard now."

"You're coming too?" he said. "What for? To guard me?"

"No. Perhaps we'll need my reaction speed. Though Karlsarm did hope I'd persuade you—Come along, please."

She led him to the bridge. Terran officers were already posted among the gleaming machines, the glittering dials. Hunyadi sat in the chair of command. But Karlsarm stood beside him, the catavray head gaping across his brow; and other men of the forest darkened that scene.

"Stand by for liftoff." Hunyadi must recite the orders himself. "Close airlocks. All detector stations report."

Evagail padded over to Karlsarm. Ridenour could not help thinking that her ruddy hair, deep curves, bare bronze, were yet more an invasion of this metal-and-plastic cosmos than the men were. A faint odor of woman lingered behind her on the sterile air.

"What's our situation with the enemy?" she asked.

"Fair, as near as we can learn," Karlsarm said. "You haven't followed events since the last fight?"

"No. I was too busy making arrangements for prisoners. Like medical care for the injured, shelter for everyone. They were too wretched, out in this mist."

"Can't say I've enjoyed it either. I'll be glad when we can let it up…Well. We didn't try an aphrodite on old Chang. Instead, we had him call the Terran chief, Admiral Cruz, and report the capture of his ship. Naturally, having no idea we'd be able to raise her, he didn't give that fact away. Supposedly we'll hold vessel and personnel for bargaining counters. The stratosphere's full of aircraft above us, but they won't do anything as long as they think we're sitting with our hostages. Only one spaceship has moved to anything like immediate striking range of us."

"Are you certain?"

"About as certain as you can be in war, whatever that means. We gave the chief communications officer to an aphrodite, of course. He listened in and decoded orders for the main fleet to stand out to space. That was a logical command for Cruz to issue, once the evacuation notice went out."

"Evacuation—?"

"Loveling, you didn't think I'd vaporize the Cities *and* their people, did you? The instant I foresaw a chance to grab this boat, I got in touch with the Grand Council—by radio, for the other continents, because time was short, so short that it didn't matter the Terrans would hear. They're good code-breakers, but I think the languages we used must've puzzled them!" Karlsarm grinned. "As soon as we'd made this haul, orders went out to our agents in every City, whether Terran- or Arulian-occupied. They were to serve notice that in one rotation period, the Cities would be erased. But they were to imply the job will be done from space."

Fright touched Evagail. "The people did evacuate, didn't they?" she breathed.

"Yes. We've monitored communications. The threat's convincing, when there's been so much fear of intervention from Aruli or from Merseia herself. An invading fleet can’t get past the blockade. But a certain percentage of fast little courier boats can. Likewise a flight of robot craft with nuclear weapons aboard: which wouldn’t be guaranteed to distinguish between friendly and unfriendly target areas.”

“But has no one thought that we, in this ship, might—”

“I trust not, or we’re dead,” Karlsarm stated. “Our timing was phased with care. The fog, and interference, and our ground fire, kept the Terrans from finding out what had happened to their cruiser. We informed them immediately that she was disabled, and they doubtless supposed it was logical. How could anyone take an undamaged Imperial warcraft, without equipment they know we don’t have? In fact, they probably took for granted we’d had outside technical assistance in rigging a trap. Remember, the City warning was already preoccupying their thoughts. Chang’s call was a precaution against their growing frantic and bombing us in the hope of getting our supposed Merseian or Arulian allies. He made it a few hours ago; and I made certain that he didn’t say the ship was captured *intact.*”

“They’ll know better now,” Hunyadi said. His face was white, his voice tormented.

“Correct. Lift as soon as you’re able,” Karlsarm said. “If we’re hit, your woman will die too.”

The executive officer jerked his head. “I know! Bridge to all stations. Lift at full power. Be prepared for attack.”

Engines growled. The deck quivered with their force. *Isis* climbed, and the sun blazed about her.

“Communications to bridge,” said the intercom. “Calls picked up from Imperialists.”

"I expected that," Karlsarm said dryly. "Broadcast a warning. We don't want to hurt them, but if they bother us, we'll swat."

Sickly, Ridenour saw the planet recede beneath him.

Flame blossomed a long way off. "Missile barrage from one air squadron stopped," said the intercom. "Shall fire be returned?"

"No," Karlsarm said. "Not unless we absolutely must."

"Thank you, sir! Those are…my people yonder." After a moment: "They were my people."

"They will be again," Evagail murmured to Ridenour. "If you help."

"What can I do?" he choked.

She touched him. He winced aside. "You can speak for us," she said. "You're respected. Your loyalty is not in doubt. You proved it afresh, that night when—We don't belong to your civilization. We don't understand how it thinks, what it will compromise on and what it will die for, the nuances, the symbols, the meanings it finds in the universe. And it doesn't understand us. I think you know us a little, though, John. Enough to see that we're no menace."

Except to the Cities," he said. "And now the Empire."

"No, they threatened us. They wouldn't leave our forests alone. As for the Empire, can't it contain one more way of living? Won't mankind be the richer for that?"

They looked at each other, and a thrumming aloneness enclosed them. A screen showed space and stars on the rim of the world.

"I suppose," he said finally, "no one can compromise on the basics of his culture. They're the larger part of his identity. To give them up is a kind of death. Many people would rather die in the body. You won't stop fighting until you're utterly crushed."

"And must that be?" Her speech fell gently on his ears. "Don't you Terrans want an end of war?"

An earthquake rumble went through the ship. Reports and orders seethed on the bridge. She was in long-range combat with a destroyer.

Undermanned, *Isis* could not stand off Cruz's whole fleet. But those units were scattered, would not reach Freehold for hours. Meanwhile, a solitary Imperial craft went against her with forlorn gallantry. Her fire-control men wept as they lashed back. But they must, to save the women who held them.

"What can I do?" Ridenour said.

"We'll call as soon as we're finished, and ask for a parley," Evagail told him. "We want you to urge that the Terrans agree. Afterward we want you to—no, not help plead our cause. Help explain it."

"Opposition attack parried," said a speaker. "Limited return broadside as per orders appears to have inflicted some damage. Opposition sheering off. Shall she be annihilated?"

"No, let her go," Karlsarm said.

Ridenour nodded at Evagail. "I'll do what I can," he said.

She took his hands, gladness bursting through her own tears, and this time he did not pull away.

Isis swung back into atmosphere. Her turrets cut loose. A doomed, empty City went skyward in flame.

Admiral Fernando Cruz Manqual stood high in the councils of this Imperial frontier; but he was a Terran merely by citizenship and remote ancestry.

Military men have gone forth from Nuevo Mexico since that stark planet first was colonized. His manner toward Ridenour was at once curt and courteous.

"And so, Professor, you recommend that we accept their terms?" He puffed hard on a crooked black cigar. "I am afraid that that is quite impossible."

Ridenour made a production of starting his pipe. He needed time to find words. Awareness pressed in on him of his surroundings.

The negotiating commissions (to use a Terran phrase, the Free People called them mind-wrestlers) had met on neutral ground, an island in the Lawrencian Ocean. Though uninhabited thus far, it was beautiful with its full feathery trees, blossoming vines, deep cane-brakes, wide white beaches where surf played and roared. But there was little chance to enjoy what the place offered. Perhaps later, if talks were promising and tension relaxed, a young Terran spaceman might encounter a lightfoot outbacker girl in some glen.

But discussion had not yet even begun. It might well never begin. The two camps were armed, separated by three kilometers of forest and, on the Terran side, a wall of guns. Ridenour was the first who crossed from one to another.

Cruz's reception had been so cold that the xenologist half expected arrest. However, the admiral appeared to comprehend why he was there and invited him into his dome for private, unofficial conversation.

The dome was open to a mild, sea-scented breeze, but also to the view of other domes, vehicles, marines on sentry-go, aircraft at hover. Wine stood on the table between the two men, but except for a formal initial toast it had not been poured. Ridenour had stated the facts, and his words had struck unresponding silence.

Now:

"I think it's best sir," Ridenour ventured. "They can be conquered, if the Empire makes the effort. But that war would be long, costly, tying up forces we need elsewhere, devastating the planet, maybe making it unfit for human habitation; they'll retaliate with some pretty horrible biological capabilities. The prisoners they hold will not be returned. Likewise the *Isis*. You'll be compelled to order her knocked out, an operation that won't come cheap."

He looked straight into the hard, mustached face. "And for what? They're quite willing to remain Terran subjects."

"They rebelled," Cruz bit off; "they collaborated with an enemy; they resisted commands given in His Majesty's name; they occasioned loss to His Majesty's Navy; they destroyed nine Imperial communities; thereby they wrecked the economy of an entire Imperial world. If this sort of behavior is let go unpunished, how long before the whole Empire breaks apart? And they aren't satisfied with asking for amnesty. No, they demand the globe be turned over to them!"

He shook his head. "I do not question your honesty, Professor—someone had to be messenger boy, I suppose—but if you believe an official in my position can possibly give a minute's consideration to those wood-runners' fantasy, I must question your judgment."

"They are not savages, sir," Ridenour said. "I've tried to explain to you something of their level of culture. My eventual written report should convince everyone."

"That is beside the point." His faded, open-throated undress uniform made Cruz look more terrible than any amount of braid and medals. The blaster at his hip had seen much use in its day.

"Not precisely, sir." Ridenour shifted in his chair. Sweat prickled his skin. "I've had a chance to think a lot about these issues, and a death-strong motivation for doing so and a career that's trained me to think in impersonal, long-range terms. What's the real good of the Empire? Isn't it the solidarity of many civilized planets? Isn't it, also, the stimulus of diversity between those planets? Suppose we did crush the Free—the outbackers. How could the Cities be rebuilt, except at enormous cost? They needed centuries to reach their modern level unaided, on this isolated, metal-impoverished world. If we poured in treasure, we could recreate them, more or less, in a few years. But what then would we have? Nine feeble mediocrities, just productive enough to require guarding, because Merseia considers them a potential threat on her Arulian flank. Whereas if we let the real Freeholders, the ones who've adapted until they can properly use this environment, if we let them flourish…we'll get, at no cost, a strong, self-supporting, self-defending outpost of Empire."

That may not be strictly true, he thought. *The outbackers don't mind acknowledging Terran suzerainty, if they can have a charter that lets them run their planet the way they want. They're too sensible to revive the nationalistic fallacy. They'll pay a bit of tribute, conduct a bit of trade. On the whole, however, we will be irrelevant to them.*

They may not always be so to us, of course. We may learn much from them. If we ever fall, they'll carry on something of what was ours. But I'd better not emphasize this.

"Even if I wanted to accommodate them," Cruz said, "I have no power. My authority is broad, yes. And I can go well beyond its formal limits, in that a central government with thousands of other worries will accept any reasonable recommendation I make. But do not exaggerate my latitude, I beg you. If I suggested that the City people, loyal subjects of His Majesty, be moved off the world of their ancestors, and that rebels, no matter how cultivated, be rewarded with its sole possession…why, I should be recalled for psychiatric examination, no?"

He sounds regretful, leaped within Ridenour. He doesn't want a butcher's campaign. If I can convince him there is a reasonable and honorable way out—

The xenologist smiled carefully around his pipestem. "True, Admiral," he said. "If the matter were put in those words. But need they be? I'm no lawyer. Still, I know a little about the subject, enough that I can sketch out an acceptable formula."

Cruz raised one eyebrow and puffed harder on his cigar.

"The point is," Ridenour said, "that juridically we have not been at war. Everybody knows Aruli sent arms and troops to aid the original revolt, no doubt at Merseian instigation. But to avoid a direct collision with Aruli and so possibly with Merseia, we haven't taken official cognizance of this. We were content to choke off further influx and reduce the enemy piecemeal. In short, Admiral, your task here has been to quell an internal, civil disturbance."

"Hm."

"The outbackers did not collaborate with an external enemy, because legally there was none."

Cruz flushed. "Treason smells no sweeter by any other name."

"It wasn't treason, sir," Ridenour argued. "The outbackers were not trying to undermine the Empire. They certainly had no wish to become Arulian or Merseian vassals!

"Put it this way: Freehold contained three factions, the human City dwellers, the Arulian City dwellers, and the outbackers. The charter of Imperial incorporation was negotiated by the first of these parties exclusively. Thus it was unfair to the other two. When amendment was refused, social difficulties resulted. The outbackers had some cooperation with the Arulians, as a matter of expediency. But it was sporadic and never affected their own simple wish for justice. Furthermore, and more important, it was not cooperation with outsiders, but rather with some other Imperial subjects.

"Actually," he added, "when one stops to think about it, the Nine Cities have not at all been innocent martyrs. Their discrimination against the Arulians, their territorial aggressions against the outbackers, were what really brought on the trouble. Merseia then exploited the opportunity—but didn't create it in the first place.

"Why then should the heedlessness of the Cities, that proved so costly to the Empire, not be penalized?"

Cruz looked disappointed. "I suppose the Policy Board could adopt some such formula," he said. "But only if it wanted to. And it won't want to. Because what formula can disguise the fact of major physical harm inflicted in sheer contumacy?"

"The formula of over-zealousness to serve His Majesty's interests," Ridenour cast back. He lifted one palm. "Wait! Please! I don't ask you, sir, to propose an official falsehood. The zeal was not greatly misguided. And it did serve Terra's best interest."

“What? How?”

“Don’t you see?” Tensely, Ridenour leaned across the table. *Here we go,* he thought, *either we fly or we crash in the fire. “The outbackers ended the war for us.”*

Cruz fell altogether quiet.

“Between you and me alone, I won’t insult your intelligence by claiming this outcome was planned in detail,” Ridenour hurried on. “But that is the effect. It was Nine Cities, their manufacturing and outworld commerce, their growth potential, that attracted the original Arulian settlers, and that lately made Freehold such a bait. With the Cities gone, what’s left to fight about? The enemy has no more bases. I’m sure he’ll accept repatriation to Aruli, including those of him who were born here. The alternative is to be milled to atoms between you and the outbackers.

“In return for this service, this removal of a bleeding wound on the Empire, a wound which might have turned into a cancer—surely the outbackers deserve the modest reward they ask. Amnesty for whatever errors they made, in seizing a chance that would never come again; a charter giving them the right to occupy and develop Freehold as they wish, though always as loyal subjects of His Majesty.”

Cruz was unmoving for a long time. When he spoke, he was hard to hear under the military noise outside. “What of the City humans?”

“They can be compensated for their losses and resettled elsewhere,” Ridenour said. “The cost will be less than for one year of continued war, I imagine; and you might well have gotten more than that. Many will complain, no doubt. But the interest of the Empire demands it. Quite apart from the problems in having two irreconcilable cultures on one planet, there’s the wish to keep any frontier peaceful. The outbackers are unprofitably tough to invade; I rather believe their next generation will furnish some of our hardiest marine volunteers; but at the same time, they don't support the kind of industrial concentration—spaceships, nuclear devices—that makes our opposition worried or greedy."

"Hm." Cruz streamed smoke from his lips. His eyes half closed. "Hm. This would imply that my command, for one, can be shifted to a region where we might lean more usefully on Merseia…yes-s-s."

Ridenour thought in a moment that was desolate: Is that why I'm so anxious to save these people? Because I hope one day they'll find a way out of the blind alley that is power politics?…

Cruz slammed a fist on the table. The bottle jumped. "By the Crown, Professor, you might have something here!" he exclaimed. "Let me pour. Let us drink together."

Nothing would happen overnight, of course. Cruz must ponder, and consult, and feel out the other side's representatives. Both groups must haggle, stall, quibble, orate, grow calculatedly angry, grow honestly weary. And from those weeks of monkey chatter would emerge nothing more than a "protocol." This must pass up through a dozen layers of bureaucrats and politicians, each of whom must assert his own immortal importance by some altogether needless and exasperating change. Finally, on Terra, the experts would confer; the computers spin out reels of results that nobody quite understood or very much heeded; the members of the Policy Board and the different interests that had put them there use this issue as one more area in which to jockey for a bit more power; the news media make inane inflammatory statements (but not many—Freehold was remote—the latest orgy given by some nobleman's latest mistress was more interesting)…and a document would arrive here, and maybe it would be signed but maybe it would be returned for "further study as reccommended...."

I won't be leaving soon, Ridenour thought. *They'll need me for months. Final agreement may not be ratified for a year or worse.*

Some hours passed before he left the Terran camp and walked toward the other. He'd doubtless best stay with the outbackers for a while. Evagail had been waiting for him. She ran down the path. "How did it go?"

"Very well, I'd say," he said.

She cast herself into his arms, laughing and weeping. He soothed her, affectionately but just a little impatiently. His prime desire at the moment was to find a place by himself, that he might write a letter home.

HUNTERS OF THE SKY CAVE

-1-

It pleased Ruethen of the Long Hand to give a feast and ball at the Crystal Moon for his enemies. He knew they must come. Pride of race had slipped from Terra, while the need to appear well-bred and sophisticated had waxed correspondingly. The fact that spaceships prowled and fought, fifty lightyears beyond Antares, made it all the more impossible a gaucherie to refuse an invitation from the Merseian representative. Besides, one could feel delightfully wicked and ever so delicately in danger.

Captain Sir Dominic Flandry, Imperial Naval Intelligence Corps, allowed himself a small complaint. “It’s not that I refuse any being’s liquor,” he said, “and Ruethen has a chef for his human-type meals who’d be worth a war to get. But I thought I was on furlough.”

“So you are,” said Diana Vinogradoff, Right Noble Lady Guardian of the Mare Crisium. “Only I saw you first.”

Flandry grinned and slid an arm about her shoulders. He felt pretty sure he was going to win his bet with Ivar del Bruno. They relaxed in the lounger and he switched off the lights.

This borrowed yacht was ridiculously frail and ornate; but a saloon which was one bubble of clear plastic, ah! Now in the sudden darkness, space leaped forth, crystal black and a wintry blaze of stars. The banded shield of

Jupiter swelled even as they watched, spilling soft amber radiance into the ship. Lady Diana became a figure out of myth, altogether beautiful; her jewels glittered like raindrops on long gown and heaped tresses. Flandry stroked his neat mustache. *I don't suppose I look too hideous myself,* he thought smugly, and advanced to the attack.

"No…please…not now." Lady Diana fended him off, but in a promising way. Flandry reclined again. No hurry. The banquet and dance would take hours. Afterward, when the yacht made its leisured way home toward Terra, and champagne bubbles danced in both their heads…"Why did you say that about being on furlough?" she asked, smoothing her coiffure with slim fingers. Her luminous nail polish danced about in the twilight like flying candle flames.

Flandry got a cigarette from his own shimmerite jacket and inhaled it to life. The glow picked out his face, long, narrow, with high cheekbones and gray eyes, seal-brown hair and straight nose. He sometimes thought his last biosculp had made it too handsome, and he ought to change it again. But what the devil, he wasn't on Terra often enough for the girls to get bored with his looks. Besides, his wardrobe, which he did take pains to keep fashionable, was expensive enough to rule out many other vanities.

"The Nyanza business was a trifle wearing, y'know," he said, to remind her of yet another exploit of his on yet another exotic planet. "I came Home for a rest. And the Merseians are such damnably strenuous creatures. It makes me tired just to look at one, let alone spar with him."

"You don't have to tonight, Sir Dominic," she smiled. "Can't you lay all this feuding aside, just for a little while, and be friends with them? I mean, we're all beings, in spite of these silly rivalries."

"I'd love to relax with them, my lady. But you see, they never do."

“Oh, come now! I’ve talked to them, often, and—”

“They can radiate all the virile charm they need,” said Flandry. For an instant his light tone was edged with acid. “But destroying the Terrestrial Empire is a full-time job.”

Then, quickly, he remembered what he was about, and picked up his usual line of banter. He wasn’t required to be an Intelligence agent all the time. Was he? When a thousand-credit bet with his friend was involved? Ivar del Bruno had insisted that Lady Diana Vinogradoff would never bestow her favors on anyone under the rank of earl. The challenge was hard to refuse, when the target was so intrinsically tempting, and when Flandry had good reason to be complacent about his own abilities. It had been a hard campaign, though, and yielding to her whim to attend the Merseian parry was only a small fraction of the lengths to which he had gone.

But now, Flandry decided, if he played his cards right for a few hours more, the end would be achieved. And afterward, a thousand credits would buy a really good orgy for two at the Everest House.

Chives, valet cum pilot cum private gunman, slipped the yacht smoothly into berth at the Crystal Moon. There was no flutter of weight change, though deceleration had been swift and the internal force-field hard put to compensate. Flandry stood up, cocked his beret at a carefully rakish angle, swirled his scarlet cloak, and offered an arm to Lady Diana. They stepped through the airlock and along a transparent tube to the palace.

The woman caught a delighted gasp. “I’ve never seen it so close up,” she whispered. “Who ever made it?”

The artificial satellite had Jupiter for background, and the Milky Way and the huge cold constellations. Glass-clear walls faced infinity, curving and tumbling like water. Planar gravity fields held faceted synthetic jewels, ruby, emerald, diamond, topaz, massing several tons each, in orbit around the central minaret. One outward thrust of bubble was left at zero gee, a conservatory where mutant ferns and orchids rippled on rhythmic breezes.

"I understand it was built for Lord Tsung-Tse about a century back," said Flandry. "His son sold it for gambling debts, and the then Merseian ambassador acquired it and had it put in orbit around Jupiter. Symbolic, eh?"

She arched questioning brows, but he thought better of explaining. His own mind ran on: *Eh, for sure. I suppose it's inevitable and so forth. Terra has been too rich for too long: we've grown old and content, no more high hazards for us. Whereas the Merseian Empire is fresh, vigorous, disciplined, dedicated, et tedious cetera. Personally, I enjoy decadence; but somebody has to hold off the Long Night for my own lifetime, and it looks as if I'm elected.*

Then they neared the portal, where a silver spiderweb gate stood open. Ruethen himself greeted them at the head of an iridescent slideramp. Such was Merseian custom. But he bowed in Terran style and touched horny lips to Lady Diana's hand. "A rare pleasure, I am certain." The bass voice gave to fluent Anglic an indescribable nonhuman accent.

She considered him. The Merseian was a true mammal, but with more traces of reptile ancestry than humankind: pale green skin, hairless and finely scaled; a low spiny ridge from the head down along the backbone to the end of a long thick tail. He was broader than a man, and would have stood a sheer two meters did he not walk with a forward-stooping gait. Except for its baldness and lack of external ears, the face was quite humanoid, even good-looking in a heavy rough way. But the eyes beneath the overhanging brow ridges were two small pits of jet. Ruethen wore the austere uniform of his class, form-fitting black with silver trim. A blaster was belted at his hip.

Lady Diana's perfectly sculped mouth curved in a smile. "Do you actually know me, my lord?" she murmured.

"Frankly, no." A barbaric bluntness. Any nobleman of Terra would have been agile to disguise his ignorance. "But while this log does burn upon the altar stone, peace-holy be it among us. As my tribe would say in the Cold Valleys."

"Of course you are an old friend of my escort," she teased.

Ruethen cocked an eye at Flandry. And suddenly the man sensed tautness in that massive frame. Just for a moment, then Ruethen's whole body became a mask. "We have met now and then," said the Merseian dryly. "Welcome, Sir Dominic. The cloakroom slave will furnish you with a mind-screen."

"What?" Despite himself, Flandry started.

"If you want one." Ruethen bared powerful teeth at Lady Diana. "Will my unknown friend grant me a dance later?"

She lost her own coolness for a second, then nodded graciously. "That would be a...unique experience, my lord," she said.

It would, at that. Flandry led her on into the ballroom. His mind worried Ruethen's curious offer, like a dog with a bone. Why—?

He saw the gaunt black shape among the rainbow Terrans, and he knew. It went cold along his spine.

He wasted no time on excuses but almost ran to the cloakroom. His feet whispered along the crystalline floor, where Orion glittered hundreds of lightyears beneath. “Mind-screen,” he snapped.

The slave was a pretty girl. Merseians took pleasure in buying humans for menial jobs. “I’ve only a few, sir,” she said. “His lordship told me to keep them for—”

“Me!” Flandry snatched the cap of wires, transistors, and power cells from her hesitant fingers. Only when it was on his head did he relax. Then he took out a fresh cigarette and steered through lilting music toward the bar. He needed a drink, badly.

Aycharaych of Chereion stood beneath high glass pillars. No one spoke to him. Mostly the humans were dancing while non-humans of various races listened to the music. A performer from Lulluan spread heaven-blue feathers on a small stage, but few watched that rare sight. Flandry elbowed past a Merseian who had just drained a two-liter tankard. “Scotch,” he said. “Straight, tall, and quick.”

Lady Diana approached. She seemed uncertain whether to be indignant or intrigued. “Now I know what they mean by cavalier treatment.” She pointed upward. “What is that thing?”

Flandry tossed off his drink. The whisky smoked down his throat, and he felt his nerves ease. “I’m told it’s my face,” he said.

“No, no! Stop fooling! I mean that horrible wire thing.”

“Mind-screen.” He held out his glass for a refill. “It heterodynes the energy radiation of the cerebral cortex in a random pattern. Makes it impossible to read what I’m thinking.”

“But I thought that was impossible anyway,” she said, bewildered. “I mean, unless you belong to a naturally telepathic species.”

“Which man isn’t,” he agreed, “except for rare cases. The non-telepath develops his own private ‘language,’ which is gibberish to anyone who hasn’t studied him for a long time as a single individual. Ergo, telepathy was never considered a particular threat in my line of work, and you’ve probably never heard of the mind-screen. It was developed just a few years ago. And the reason for its development is standing over there.”

She followed his eyes. “Who? That tall being in the black mantle?”

“The same. I had a brush with him, and discovered to my…er…discomfiture, shall we say?…that he has a unique gift. Whether or not all his race does, I couldn’t tell you. But within a range of a few hundred meters, Aycharaych of Chereion can read the mind of any individual of any species, whether he’s ever met his victim before or not.”

“But—why, then—”

“Exactly. He’s *persona non grata* throughout our territory, of course, to be shot on sight. But as you know, my lady,” said Flandry in a bleak tone, “we are not now in the Terrestrial Empire. Jupiter belongs to the Dispersal of Ymir.”

“Oh,” said Lady Diana. She colored. “A telepath!”

Flandry gave her a lopsided grin. “Aycharaych is the equivalent of a gentleman,” he said. “He wouldn’t tell on you. But I’d better go talk to him now.” He bowed. “You are certain not to lack company. I see a dozen men converging here already.”

“So there are.” She smiled. “But I think Aycharaych—how *do* you pronounce it, that guttural *ch* baffles me—I think he’ll be much more intriguing.” She took his arm.

Flandry disengaged her. She resisted. He closed a hand on her wrist and shoved it down with no effort. Maybe his visage was a fake, he told himself once in a while, but at least his body was his own, and the dreary hours of calisthenics had some reward. "I'm sorry, my lady," he said, "but I am about to talk shop, and you're not initiated in the second oldest profession. Have fun."

Her eyes flared offended vanity. She whirled about and welcomed the Duke of Mars with far more enthusiasm than that foolish young man warranted. Flandry sighed. *I suppose I owe you a thousand credits, Ivar.* He cocked his cigarette at a defiant angle, and strolled across the ballroom.

Aycharaych smiled. His face was also closely humanoid, but in a bony, sword-nosed fashion; the angles of mouth and jaw were exaggerated into Vs. It might almost have been the face of some Byzantine saint. But the skin was a pure golden hue, the brows were arches of fine blue feathers, the bald skull carried a feather crest and pointed ears. Broad chest, wasp waist, long skinny legs were hidden by the cloak. The feet, with four clawed toes and spurs on the ankles, showed bare.

Flandry felt pretty sure that intelligent life on Chereion had evolved from birds, and that the planet must be dry, with a thin cold atmosphere. He had hints that its native civilization was incredibly old, and reason to believe it was not a mere subject of Merseia. But beyond that, his knowledge emptied into darkness. He didn't even know where in the Merseian sphere the sun of Chereion lay.

Aycharaych extended a six-fingered hand. Flandry shook it. The digits were delicate within his own. For a brutal moment he thought of squeezing hard, crushing the fine bones. Aycharaych stood a bit taller than he, but Flandry was a rather big human, much broader and more solid.

"A pleasure to meet you again, Sir Dominic," said Aycharaych. His voice was low, sheer beauty to hear. Flandry looked at rust-red eyes, with a warm metallic luster, and released the hand.

"Hardly unexpected," he said. "For you, that is."

"You travel about so much," Aycharaych said. "I was sure a few men of your corps would be here tonight, but I could not be certain of your own whereabouts."

"I wish I ever was of yours," said Flandry ruefully.

"Congratulations upon your handling of *l'affaire Nyanza.* We are going to miss A'u on our side. He had a certain watery brilliance."

Flandry prevented himself from showing surprise. "I thought that aspect of the business had been hushed up," he said. "But little pitchers seem to have big ears. How long have you been in the Solar System?"

"A few weeks," said Aycharaych. "Chiefly a pleasure trip." He cocked his head. "Ah, the orchestra has begun a Strauss waltz. Very good. Though of course Johann is not to be compared to Richard, who will always be *the* Strauss."

"Oh?" Flandry's interest in ancient music was only slightly greater than his interest in committing suicide. "I wouldn't know."

"You should, my friend. Not even excepting Xingu, Strauss is the most misunderstood composer of known galactic history. Were I to be imprisoned for life with only one tape, I would choose his *Death and Transfiguration* and be satisfied."

"I'll arrange it," offered Flandry at once.

Aycharaych chuckled and took the man's arm. "Come, let us find a more peaceful spot. But I pray you, do not waste so amusing an occasion on me. I own to visiting Terra clandestinely, but that part of it was entirely for the easement of my personal curiosity. I had no intention of burgling the Imperial offices—"

"Which are equipped with Aycharaych alarms anyway."

"Telepathizing detectors? Yes, so I would assume. I am a little too old and stiff, and your gravity a little too overpowering, to indulge in my own thefts. Nor have I the type of dashing good looks needed, I am told by all the teleplays, for cloak and dagger work. No, I merely wished to see the planet which bred such a race as yours. I walked in a few forests, inspected certain paintings, visited some chosen graves, and returned here. Whence I am about to depart, by the way. You need not get your Imperium to put pressure on the Ymirites to expel me; my courier ship leaves in twenty hours."

"For where?" asked Flandry.

"Hither and yon," said Aycharaych lightly.

Flandry felt his stomach muscles grow hard. "Syrax?" he got out.

They paused at the entrance to the null-gee conservatory. A single great sphere of water balanced like silver at its very heart, with fern jungle and a thousand purple-scarlet blooms forming a cavern around it, the stars and mighty Jupiter beyond. Later, no doubt, the younger and drunker humans would be peeling off their clothes and going for a free-fall swim in that serene globe. But now only the music dwelt here. Aycharaych kicked himself over the threshold. His cloak flowed like black wings as he arrowed across the bubble-dome. Flandry came after, in clothes that were fire and trumpeting. He needed a moment before he adjusted to weightlessness. Aycharaych, whose ancestors once whistled in Chereion's sky, appeared to have no such trouble.

The nonhuman stopped his flight by seizing a bracken frond. He looked at a violet burst of orchids and his long hawk-head inclined. “Black against the quicksilver water globe,” he mused; “the universe black and cold beyond both. A beautiful arrangement, and with that touch of horror necessary to the highest art.”

“Black?” Flandry glanced startled at the violet flowers. Then he clamped his lips.

But Aycharaych had already grasped the man’s idea. He smiled. *“Touché*. I should not have let slip that I am color blind in the blue wavelengths.”

“But you see further into the red than I do,” predicted Flandry.

“Yes. I admit, since you would infer so anyhow, my native sun is cooler and redder than yours. If you think that will help you identify it, among all the millions of stars in the Merseian sphere, accept the information with my compliments.”

“The Syrax Cluster is middle Population One,” said Flandry. “Not too suitable for your eyes.”

Aycharaych stared at the water. Tropical fish were visible within its globe, like tiny many-colored rockets. “It does not follow I am going to Syrax,” he said tonelessly. “I certainly have no personal wish to do so. Too many warcraft, too many professional officers. I do not like their mentality.” He made a free-fall bow. “Your own excepted, of course.”

“Of course,” said Flandry. “Still, if you could do something to break the deadlock out there, in Merseia’s favor—”

“You flatter me,” said Aycharaych. “But I fear you have not yet outgrown the romantic view of military politics. The fact is that neither side wants to make a total effort to control the Syrax stars. Merseia could use them as a valuable base, outflanking Antares and thus a spearhead poised at that entire sector of your empire. Terra wants control simply to deny us the cluster. Since neither government wishes, at present, to break the nominal state of peace, they maneuver about out there, mass naval strength, spy and snipe and hold running battles…but the game of all-out seizure is not worth the candle of all-out war."

"But if you could tip the scales, personally, so our boys lost out at Syrax," said Flandry, "we wouldn't counter-attack your imperial sphere. You know that. It'd invite counter-counterattack on us. Heavens, Terra itself might be bombed! We're much too comfortable to risk such an outcome." He pulled himself up short. Why expose his own bitterness, and perhaps be arrested on Terra for sedition?

"If we possessed Syrax," said Aycharaych, "it would, with 71 percent probability, hasten the collapse of the Terran hegemony by a hundred years, plus or minus ten. That is the verdict of our military computers—though I myself feel the faith our High Command has in them is naive and rather touching. However, the predicted date of Terra's fall would still lie 150 years hence. So I wonder why your government cares."

Flandry shrugged. "A few of us are a bit sentimental about our planet," he answered sadly. "And then, of course, we ourselves aren't out there being shot at."

"That is the human mentality again," said Aycharaych. "Your instincts are such that you never accept dying. You, personally, down underneath everything, do you not feel death is just a little bit vulgar, not quite a gentleman?"

"Maybe. What would you call it?"

"A completion."

Their talk drifted to impersonalities. Flandry had never found anyone else whom he could so converse with. Aycharaych could be wise and learned and infinitely kind when he chose: or flick a whetted wit across the pompous face of empire. To speak with him, touching now and then on the immortal questions, was almost like a confessional—for he was not human and did not judge human deeds, yet he seemed to understand the wishes at their root.

At last Flandry made a reluctant excuse to get away. *Nu,* he told himself, *business is business.* Since Lady Diana was studiously ignoring him, he enticed a redhaired bit of fluff into an offside room, told her he would be back in ten minutes, and slipped through a rear corridor. Perhaps any Merseian who saw him thus disappear wouldn't expect him to return for an hour or two; might not recognize the girl when she got bored waiting and found her own way to the ballroom again. One human looked much like another to the untrained non-human eye, and there were at least a thousand guests by now.

It was a flimsy camouflage for his exit, but the best he could think of.

Flandry re-entered the yacht and roused Chives. "Home," he said. "Full acceleration. Or secondary drive, if you think you can handle it within the System in this clumsy gold-plated hulk."

"Yes, sir. I can."

At faster-than-light, he'd be at Terra in minutes, rather than hours. Excellent! It might actually be possible to arrange for Aycharaych's completion.

More than half of Flandry hoped the attempt would fail.

It happened to be day over North America, where Vice Admiral Fenross had his offices. Not that that mattered; they were like as not to work around the clock in Intelligence, or else Flandry could have gotten his superior out of bed. He would, in fact, have preferred to do so. As matters worked out, however, he created a satisfactory commotion. He saved an hour by having Chives dive the yacht illegally through all traffic lanes above Admiralty Center. With a coverall over his parry clothes, he dove from the airlock and rode a grav repulsor down to the 40th flange of the Intelligence tower. While the yacht was being stopped by a sky monitor, Flandry was arguing with a marine on guard duty. He looked down the muzzle of a blaster and said: “You know me, sergeant. Let me by. Urgent.”

“I guess I do know your face, sir,” the marine answered. “But faces can be changed and nobody gets by me without a pass. Just stand there while I buzzes a patrol.”

Flandry considered making a jump for it. But the Imperial Marines were on to every trick of judo he knew. Hell take it, an hour wasted on identification—! Wait. Memory clicked into place. “You’re Mohandas Parkinson,” said Flandry. “You have four darling children, your wife is unreasonably monogamous, and you were playing Go at Madame Cepheid’s last month.”

Sergeant Parkinson’s gun wavered. “Huh?” he said. Then, loudly. “I don’ know whatcher talking about!”

“Madame Cepheid’s Go board is twenty meters square,” said Flandry, “and the pieces are live girls. In the course of a game—Does that ring a bell, sergeant? I was there too, watching, and I’m sure your wife would be delighted to hear you are still capable of such truly epic—”

“Get on your way, you...blackmailer!” choked Parkinson. He gulped and added, “Sir.”

Captain Flandry grinned, patted him on his helmet, holstered his weapon for him, and went quickly inside.

Unlike most, Fenross had no beautiful receptionist in his outer office. A robovoice asked the newcomer’s business. “Hero,” he said blandly. The robot said Admiral Fenross was occupied with a most disturbing new development. Flandry said he was also, and got admission.

Hollow-cheeked and shaky, Fenross looked across his desk. His eyes were not too bloodshot to show a flick of hatred. “Oh,” he said. “You. Well, Captain, what interrupts your little tête-à-tête with your Merseian friends?”

Flandry sat down and took out a cigarette. He was not surprised that Fenross had set spies on him, but the fact was irritating nonetheless. *How the devil did this feud ever get started?* he wondered. *Is it only that I took that girl... what was her name, anyway? Marjorie? Margaret?...was it only that I once took her from him when we were cadets together? Why, I did it for a joke. She wasn’t very good-looking in spite of everything biosculp could do.*

“I’ve news too hot for any com circuit,” he said. “I just now—”

“You’re on furlough,” snapped Fenross. “You’ve got no business here.”

“What? Look, it was Aycharaych! Himself! At the Crystal Moon!”

A muscle twitched in Fenross’ cheek. “I can’t hear an unofficial report,” he said. “All ruin is exploding beyond Aldebaran. If you think you’ve done something brilliant, file an account in the regular channels.”

“But—for God’s sake!” Flandry sprang to his feet. “Admiral Fenross, sir, whatever the hell you want me to call you, he’s leaving the Solar System in a matter of hours. Courier boat. We can't touch him in Ymirite space, but if we waylaid him on his way out—He'll be tricky, the ambush might not work, but name of a little green pig, if we can get Aycharaych it'll be better than destroying a Merseian fleet!"

Fenross reached out a hand which trembled ever so faintly, took a small pillbox and shook a tablet loose. "Haven't slept in forty hours," he muttered. "And you off on that yacht…I can't take cognizance, Captain. Not under the circumstances." He glanced up again. Slyness glistened in his eyes. "Of course," he said, "if you want to cancel your own leave—"

Flandry stood a moment, rigid, staring at the desk-bound man who hated him. Memory trickled back: *After I broke off with her, yes, the girl did go a bit wild. She was killed in an accident on Venus, wasn't she…drunken party flying over the Saw…yes, I seem to've heard about it. And Fenross has never even looked at another woman.*

He sighed. "Sir, I am reporting myself back on active duty."

Fenross nodded. "File that with the robot as you leave. Now I've got work for you."

"But Aycharaych—"

"We'll handle him. I've got a more suitable assignment in mind." Fenross grinned, tossed down his pill and followed it with a cup of water from the desk fountain. "After all, a dashing field agent ought to dash, don't you think?"

Could it be just the fact that he's gotten more rank but I've had more fun? wondered Flandry. *Who knows? Does he himself?* He sat down again, refusing to show expression.

Fenross drummed the desk top and stared at a blank wall. His uniform was as severe as regulations permitted—Flandry's went in the opposite direction—but it still formed an unnecessarily gorgeous base for his tortured red head. “This is under the strictest secrecy,” he began in a rapid, toneless voice. “I have no idea how long we can suppress the news, though. One of our colonies is under siege. Deep within the Imperial sphere.”

Flandry was forced to whistle. “Where? Who?”

“Ever heard of Vixen? Well, I never had either before this. It’s a human-settled planet of an F6 star about a hundred lightyears from Sol, somewhat north and clockwise of Aldebaran. Oddball world, but moderately successful as colonies go. You know that region is poor in systems of interest to humans, and very little explored. In effect, Vixen sits in the middle of a desert. Or does it? You’ll wonder when I tell you that a space fleet appeared several weeks ago and demanded that it yield to occupation. The ships were of exotic type, and the race crewing them can’t be identified. But some, at least, spoke pretty good Anglic.”

Flandry sat dead still. His mind threw up facts, so familiar as to be ridiculous, and yet they must now be considered again. The thing which had happened was without precedent.

An interstellar domain can have no definite borders; stars are scattered too thinly, their types too intermingled. And there are too many of them. In very crude approximation, the Terrestrial Empire was a sphere of some 400 lightyears diameter, centered on Sol, and contained an estimated four million stars. But of these less than half had even been visited. A bare 100,000 were directly concerned with the Imperium, a few multiples of that number might have some shadowy contact and owe a theoretical allegiance. Consider a single planet; realize that it is a *world,* as big and varied and strange as this Terra ever was, with as many conflicting elements of race and language and culture among its natives; estimate how much government even one planet requires, and see how quickly a reign over many becomes impossibly huge. Then consider, too, how small a percentage of stars are of any use to a given species (too hot, too cold, too turbulent, too many companions) and, of those, how few will have even one planet where that species is reasonably safe. The Empire becomes tenuous indeed. And its inconceivable extent is still the merest speck in one outlying part of one spiral arm of one galaxy; among a hundred billion or more great suns, those known to any single world are the barest, tiniest handful.

However—attack that far within the sphere? No! Individual ships could sneak between the stars easily enough. But a war fleet could never come a hundred lightyears inward from the farthest Imperial bases. The instantaneous "wake" of disturbed space-time, surging from so many vessels, would be certain of detection somewhere along the line. Therefore—

"Those ships were built within our sphere," said Flandry slowly. "And not too many parsecs from Vixen."

Fenross sneered. "Your genius dazzles me. As a matter of fact, though, they might have come further than usual, undetected, because so much of the Navy is out at Syrax now. Our interior posts are stripped, some completely deserted. I'll agree the enemy must base within several parsecs of Vixen. But that doesn't mean they live there. Their base might be a space station, a rogue planet, or something else we'll never find; they could have sent their fleet to it a ship at a time, over a period of months."

Flandry shook his head. "Supply lines. Having occupied Vixen, they'll need to maintain their garrison till it's self-sufficient. No, they have a home somewhere in the Imperial sphere, surely in the same quadrant. Which includes only about a million stars! Say, roughly, 100,000 possibilities, some never even catalogued. How many years would it take how many ships to check out 100,000 systems?”

“Yeh. And what would be happening meanwhile?”

“What has?’

“The Vixenites put up a fight. There’s a small naval base on their planet, unmanned at present, but enough of the civilian population knew how to make use of its arsenal. They got couriers away, of course, and Aldebaran Station sent what little help it could. When last heard from, Vixen was under siege. We’re dispatching a task force, but it’ll take time to get there. That wretched Syrax business ties our hands. Reports indicate the aliens haven’t overwhelming strength; we could send enough ships to make mesons of them. But if we withdrew that many from Syrax, they’d come back to find Merseia entrenched in the Cluster.”

“Tie-in?” wondered Flandry.

“Who knows? I’ve got an idea, though, and your assignment will be to investigate it.” Fenross leaned over the desk. His sunken eyes probed at Flandry’s. “We’re all too ready to think of Merseia when anything goes wrong,” he said bleakly. “But after all, they live a long ways off. There’s another alien power right next door…and as closely interwoven with Merseia as it is with us.”

“You mean Ymir?” Flandry snorted. “Come now, dear chief, you’re letting your xenophobia run away with you.”

“Consider,” said Fenross. “Somebody, or something, helped those aliens at Vixen build a modern war fleet. They couldn’t have done it alone: we’d have known it if they’d begun exploring stellar space, and knowledge has to precede conquest. Somebody, very familiar with our situation, has briefed the aliens on our language, weapons, territorial layout—the works.

Somebody, I'm sure, told them when to attack: right now, when nearly our whole strength is at Syrax. *Who?* There's one item. The aliens use a helium-pressure power system like the Ymirites. That's unmistakable on the detectors. Helium-pressure is all right, but it's not as convenient as the hydrogen-heavy atom cycle; not if you live under terrestroid conditions, and the aliens very definitely do. The ships, their shape I mean, also have a subtly Ymirite touch. I'll show you pictures that have arrived with the reports. Those ships look as if they'd been designed by some engineer more used to working with hydrolithium than steel."

"You mean the Ymirites are behind the aliens? But—"

"But nothing. There's an Ymirite planet in the Vixen system too. Who knows how many stars those crawlers have colonized…stars we never even heard about? Who knows how many client races they might lord it over? And they travel blithely back and forth, across our sphere and Merseia's and—Suppose they are secretly in cahoots with Merseia What better way to smuggle Merseian agents into our systems? We don't stop Ymirite ships. We aren't able to! But any of them could carry a force-bubble with terrestroid conditions inside…I've felt for years we've been too childishly trustful of Ymir. It's past time we investigated them in detail. It may already be too late!"

Flandry stubbed out his cigarette. "But what interest have they got in all this?" he asked mildly. "What could any oxygen-breathing race have that they'd covet—or bribe them with?"

"That I don't know," said Fenross. "I could be dead wrong. But I want it looked into. You're going back to Jupiter, Captain. At once."

"What?"

"We're chronically undermanned in this miserable stepchild of the service," said Fenross. "Now, worse than ever. You'll have to go alone. Snoop around as much as you can. Take all the time you need. But don't come back without a report that'll give some indication—one way or another!"

Or come back dead, thought Flandry. He looked into the twitching face across the desk and knew that was what Fenross wanted.

-4-

He got Chives out of arrest and debated with himself whether to sneak back to Ruethen's party. It was still going on. But no. Aycharaych would never have mentioned his own departure without assuming Flandry would notify headquarters. It might be his idea of a joke—it might be a straightforward challenge, for Aycharaych was just the sort who'd enjoy seeing if he could elude an ambush—most likely, the whole thing was deliberate, for some darkling purpose. In any event, a junior Intelligence officer or two could better keep tabs on the Chereionite than Flandry, who was prominent. Having made arrangements for that, the man took Chives to his private flitter.

Though voluptuous enough inside, the *Hooligan* was a combat boat, with guns and speed. Even on primary, sub-light drive, it could reach Jupiter in so few hours that Flandry would have little enough time to think what he would do. He set the autopilot and bade Chives bring a drink. "A stiff one," he added.

"Yes, sir. Do you wish your whites laid out, or do you prefer a working suit?"

Flandry considered his rumpled elegance and sighed. Chives had spent an hour dressing him—for nothing. “Plain gray zip-suit,” he said. “Also sackcloth and ashes.”

“Very good, sir.” The valet poured whisky over ice. He was from Shalmu, quite humanoid except for bald emerald skin, prehensile tail, one-point-four meter height, and details of ear, hand, and foot. Flandry had bought him some years back, named him Chives, and taught him any number of useful arts. Lately the being had politely refused manumission. (“If I may make so bold as to say it, sir, I am afraid my tribal customs would now have a lack of interest for me matched only by their deplorable lack of propriety.”)

Flandry brooded over his drink a while. “What do you know about Ymir?” he asked.

“Ymir is the arbitrary human name, sir, for the chief planet of a realm—if I may use that word advisedly—coterminous with the Terrestrial Empire, the Merseian, and doubtless a considerable part of the galaxy beyond.”

“Don’t be so bloody literal-minded,” said Flandry. “Especially when I’m being rhetorical. I mean, what do you know about their ways of living, thinking, believing, hoping? What do they find beautiful and what is too horrible to tolerate? Good galloping gods, what do they even use for a government? They call themselves the Dispersal when they talk Anglic—but is that a translation or a mere tag? How can we tell? What do you and I have in common with a being that lives at a hundred below zero, breathing hydrogen at a pressure which makes our ocean beds look like vacuum, drinking liquid methane and using allotropic ice to make his tools?

“We were ready enough to cede Jupiter to them: Jupiter-type planets throughout our realm. They had terrestroid planets to offer in exchange.

Why, that swap doubled the volume of our sphere. And we traded a certain amount of scientific information with them, high-pressure physics for low-pressure, oxygen metabolisms versus hydrogen…but disappointingly little, when you get down to it. They'd been in interstellar space longer than we had. (And how did they learn atomics under Ymirite air pressure? We don't ask it!) They'd already observed our kind of life throughout…how much of the galaxy? We couldn't offer them a thing of importance, except the right to colonize some more planets in peace. They've never shown as much interest in our wars—the wars of the oxygen breathers on the pygmy planets—as you and I would have in a fight between two ant armies. Why should they care? You could drop Terra or Merseia into Jupiter and it'd hardly make a decent splash. For a hundred years, now, the Ymirites have scarcely said a word to us. Or to Merseia, from all indications. Till now.

"And yet I glanced at the pictures taken out near Vixen, just before we left. And Fenross, may he fry, is right. Those blunt ships were made on a planet similar to Terra, but they have Ymirite lines…the way the first Terran automobiles had the motor in front, because that was where the horse used to be…It could be coincidence, I suppose. Or a red herring. Or—I don't know. How am I supposed to find out, one man on a planet with ten times the radius of Terra? Judas!" He drained his glass and held it out again.

Chives refilled, then went back to the clothes locker. "A white scarf or a blue?" he mused. "Hm, yes, I do believe the white, sir."

The flitter plunged onward. Flandry needed a soberjolt by the time he had landed on Ganymede.

There was an established procedure for such a visit. It hadn't been used for decades, Flandry had had to look it up, but the robot station still waited patiently between rough mountains. He presented his credentials, radio contact was made with the primary planet, unknown messages traveled over its surface. A reply was quick: yes, Captain, the governor can receive you. A spaceship is on its way, and will be at your disposal.

Flandry looked out at the stony desolation of Ganymede. It was not long before a squat, shimmering shape had made grav-beam descent. A tube wormed from its lock to the flitter's. Flandry sighed. "Let's go," he said, and strolled across. Chives trotted after with a burden of weapons, tools, and instruments—none of which were likely to be much use. There was a queasy moment under Ganymede's natural gravity, then they had entered the Terra-conditioned bubble.

It looked like any third-class passenger cabin, except for the outmoded furnishings and a bank of large viewscreens. Hard to believe that this was only the material inner lining of a binding-force field: that that same energy, cousin to that which held the atomic nucleus together, was all which kept this room from being crushed beneath intolerable pressure. Or, at the moment, kept the rest of the spaceship from exploding outward. The bulk of the vessel was an alloy of water, lithium, and metallic hydrogen, stable only under Jovian surface conditions.

Flandry let Chives close the airlock while he turned on the screens. They gave him a full outside view. One remained blank, a communicator, the other showed the pilot's cabin.

An artificial voice, ludicrously sweet in the style of a century ago, said: "Greeting, Terran. My name, as nearly as it may be rendered in sonic equivalents, is Horx. I am your guide and interpreter while you remain on Jupiter."

Flandry looked into the screen. The Ymirite didn't quite register on his mind. His eyes weren't trained to those shapes and proportions, seen by that weirdly shifting red-blue-brassy light. (Which wasn't the real thing, even, but an electronic translation. A human looking straight into the thick Jovian air would only see darkness.) "Hello, Horx," he said to the great black multi-legged shape with the peculiarly tendrilled heads. He wet his lips, which seemed a bit dry. "I, er, expect you haven't had such an assignment before in your life."

"I did several times, a hundred or so Terra-years ago," said Horx casually. He didn't seem to move, to touch any controls, but Ganymede receded in the viewscreens and raw space blazed forth. "Since then I have been doing other work." Hesitation. Or was it? At last: "Recently, though, I have conducted several missions to our surface."

"What?" choked Flandry.

"Merseian," said Horx. "You may inquire of the governor if you wish." He said nothing else the whole trip.

Jupiter, already big in the screen, became half of heaven. Flandry saw blots march across its glowing many-colored face, darknesses which were storms that could have swallowed all Terra. Then the sight was lost; he was dropping through the atmosphere. Still the step-up screens tried loyally to show him something: he saw clouds of ammonia crystals, a thousand kilometers long, streaked with strange blues and greens that were free-radicals; he saw lightning leap across a purple sky, and the distant yellow flare of sodium explosions. As he descended, he could even feel, very dimly, the quiver of the ship under enormous winds, and hear the muffled shriek and thunder of the air.

They circled the night side, still descending, and Flandry saw a methane ocean, beating waves flattened by pressure and gravity against a cliff of black allotropic ice, which crumbled and was lifted again even as he watched. He saw an endless plain where things half trees and half animals —except that they were neither, in any Terrestrial sense—lashed snaky fronds after ribbon-shaped flyers a hundred meters in length. He saw bubbles stream past on a red wind, and they were lovely in their myriad colors and they sang in thin crystal voices which somehow penetrated the ship. But they couldn't be true bubbles at this pressure. Could they?

A city came into view, just beyond the dawn line. If it was a city. It was, at least, a unified structure of immense extent, intricate with grottos and arabesques, built low throughout but somehow graceful and gracious. On Flandry's screen its color was polished blue. Here and there sparks and threads of white energy would briefly flash. They hurt his eyes. There were many Ymirites about, flying on their own wings or riding in shell-shaped power gliders. You wouldn't think of Jupiter as a planet where anything could fly, until you remembered the air density; then you realized it was more a case of swimming.

The spaceship came to a halt, hovering on its repulsor field. Horx said: "Governor Thua."

Another Ymirite squatted suddenly in the outside communication screen. He held something which smoked and flickered from shape to shape. The impersonally melodious robot voice said for him, under the eternal snarling of a wind which would have blown down anything men could build; "Welcome. What is your desire?"

The old records had told Flandry to expect brusqueness. It was not discourtesy; what could a human and an Ymirite make small talk about? The man puffed a cigarette to nervous life and said: "I am here on an investigative mission for my government.” Either these beings were or were not already aware of the Vixen situation; if not, then they weren’t allies of Merseia and would presumably not tell. Or if they did, what the devil difference? Flandry explained.

Thua said at once, “You seem to have very small grounds for suspecting us. A mere similarity of appearances and nuclear technology is logically insufficient.”

“I know,” said Flandry, “It could be a fake.”

“It could even be that one or a few Ymirite individuals have offered advice to the entities which instigated this attack,” said Thua. You couldn’t judge from the pseudo-voice, but he seemed neither offended nor sympathetic: just monumentally uninterested. “The Dispersal has been nonstimulate as regards individuals for many cycles. However, I cannot imagine what motive an Ymirite would have for exerting himself on behalf of oxygen breathers. There is no insight to be gained from such acts, and certainly no material profit.”

“An aberrated individual?” suggested Flandry with little hope. “Like a man poking an anthill—an abode of lesser animals—merely to pass the time?”

“Ymirites do not aberrate in such fashion,” said Thua stiffly.

“I understand there’ve been recent Merseian visits here.”

“I was about to mention that. I am doing all I can to assure both empires of Ymir’s strict neutrality. It would be a nuisance if either attacked us and forced us to exterminate their species.”

Which is the biggest brag since that fisherman who caught the equator, thought Flandry, *or else is sober truth.* He said aloud, choosing his words one by one: “What, then, were the Merseians doing here?”

"They wished to make some scientific observations of the Jovian surface," said Thua. "Horx guided them, like you. Let him describe their activities."

The pilot stirred in his chamber, spreading black wings. "We simply cruised about a few times. They had optical instruments, and took various spectroscopic readings. They said it was for research in solid-state physics."

"Curiouser and curiouser," said Flandry. He stroked his mustache. "They have as many Jovoid planets in their sphere as we do. The detailed report on Jovian conditions which the first Ymirite settlers made to Terra, under the treaty, has never been secret. No, I just don't believe that research yarn."

"It did seem dubious," agreed Thua, "but I do not pretend to understand every vagary of the alien mind. It was easier to oblige them than argue about it."

Chives cleared his throat and said unexpectedly: "If I may take the liberty of a question, sir, were all these recent visitors of the Merseian species?"

Thua's disgust could hardly be mistaken: "Do you expect me to register insignificant differences between one such race and another?"

Flandry sighed. "It looks like deadlock, doesn't it?" he said.

"I can think of no way to give you positive assurance that Ymir is not concerned, except my word," said Thua. "However, if you wish you may cruise about this planet at random and see if you observe anything out of the ordinary." His screen went blank.

"Big fat chance!" muttered Flandry. "Give me a drink, Chives."

"Will you follow the governor's proposal?" asked Horx.

“Reckon so.” Flandry flopped into a chair. “Give us the standard guided tour. I’ve never been on Jupiter, and might as well have something to show for my time.”

The city fell behind, astonishingly fast. Flandry sipped the whiskey Chives had gotten from the supplies they had along, and watched the awesome landscape with half an eye. Too bad he was feeling so sour; this really was an experience such as is granted few men. But he had wasted hours on a mission which any second-year cadet could have handled…while guns were gathered at Syrax and Vixen stood alone against all hell…or even while Lady Diana danced with other men and Ivar del Bruno waited grinning to collect his bet. Flandry said an improper word. “What a nice subtle bed of coals for Fenross to rake me over,” he added. “The man has a genius for it.” He gulped his drink and called for another.

“We’re rising, sir,” said Chives much later.

Flandry saw mountains which trembled and droned, blue mists that whirled about their metallic peaks, and then the Jovian ground was lost in darkness. The sky began to turn blood color. “What are we heading for now?” he asked. He checked a map. “Oh, yes, I see.”

“I venture to suggest to the pilot, sir, that our speed may be a trifle excessive,” said Chives.

Flandry heard the wind outside rise to a scream, with subsonic undertones that shivered in his marrow. Red fog flew roiled and tattered past his eyes. Beyond, he saw crimson clouds the height of a Terrestrial sierra, with lightning leaping in their bellies. The light from the screens washed like a dull fire into the cabin.

“Yes,” he muttered. “Slow down, Horx. There’ll be another one along in a minute, as the story has it—”

And then he saw the pilot rise up in his chamber, fling open a door, and depart. An instant afterward Flandry saw Horx beat wings against the spaceship's furious slipstream; then the Ymirite was whirled from view. And then Chives saw the thing which hung in the sky before them, and yelled. He threw his tail around Flandry's waist while he clung with hands and legs to a bunk stanchion. And then the world exploded into thunder and night.

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Flandry awoke. He spent centuries wishing he hadn't. A blurred green shape said: "Your aneurine, sir."

"Go 'way," mumbled Flandry. "What was I drinking?"

"Pardon my taking the liberty, sir," said Chives. He pinned the man's wrists down with his tail, held Flandry's nose with one hand and poured the drug down his mouth with the other. "There, now, we are feeling much better, aren't we?"

"Remind me to shoot you, slowly." Flandry gagged for a while. The medicine took hold and he sat up. His brain cleared and he looked at the screen bank.

Only one of the viewers still functioned. It showed thick, drifting redness, shot through with blues and blacks. A steady rough growling, like the breakup of a polar ice pack, blasted its way through the ultimate rigidity of the force bubble—God, what must the noise be like outside? The cabin was tilted. Slumped in its lower corner, Flandry began to glide across the floor again; the ship was still being rolled about. The internal gravity field had saved their lives by cushioning the worst shock, but then it had gone dead. He felt the natural pull of Jupiter upon him, and every cell was weary from its own weight.

He focused on a twisted bunk frame. “Did I do that with my own little head?”

“We struck with great force, sir,” Chives told him. “I permitted myself to bandage your scalp. However, a shot of growth hormone will heal the cuts in a few hours, sir, if we escape the present dilemma.”

Flandry lurched to his feet. His bones seemed to be dragging him back downward. He felt the cabin walls tremble and heard them groan. The force bubble had held, which meant that its generator and the main power plant had survived the crash. Not unexpectedly; a ship like this was built on the “fail safe” principle. But there was no access whatsoever from this cabin to the pilot room—unless you were an Ymirite. It made no difference whether the ship was still flyable or not Human and Shalmuan were stuck here till they starved. Or, more likely, till the atomic-power plant quit working, under some or other of the buffets this ship was receiving.

Well, when the force-field collapsed and Jovian air pressure flattened the cabin, it would be a merciful death.

“The hell with that noise,” said Flandry. “I don’t want to die so fast I can’t feel it. I want to see death coming, and make the stupid thing fight for every centimeter of me.”

Chives gazed into the sinister crimson which filled the last electronic window. His slight frame stooped, shaking in the knees; he was even less adapted to Jovian weight than Flandry. “Where are we, sir?” he husked. “I was thinking primarily about what to make for lunch, just before the collision, and—”

“The Red Spot area,” said Flandry. “Or, rather, the fringe of it. We must be on an outlying berg, or whatever the deuce they’re called.”

“Our guide appears to have abandoned us, sir.”

“Hell, he got us into this mess. On purpose! I now know for a fact there’s at least one Ymirite working for the enemy—whoever the enemy is. But the information won’t be much use if we become a pair of grease spots.”

The ship shuddered and canted. Flandry grabbed a stanchion for support, eased himself down on the bunk, and said, very quickly, for destruction roared around him:

“You’ve seen the Red Spot from space, Chives. It’s been known for a long time, even before space travel, that it’s a…a mass of aerial pack ice. Lord, what a fantastic place to die! What happens is that at a certain height in the Jovian atmosphere, the pressure allows a red crystalline form of ice—not the white stuff we splash whisky onto, or the black allotrope down at the surface, or the super-dense variety in the mantle around the Jovian core. Here the pressure is right for red ice, and the air density is identical, so it floats. An initial formation created favorable conditions for the formation of more…so it accumulated in this one region, much as polar caps build up on cozier type planets. Some years a lot of it melts away—changes phase—the Red Spot looks paler from outside. Other years you get a heavy pile-up, and Jupiter seems to have a moving wound. But always, Chives, the Red Spot is a pack of flying glaciers, stretching broader than all Terra. And we’ve been crashed on one of them!”

“Then our present situation can scarcely be accidental, sir,” nodded Chives imperturbably. “I daresay, with all the safety precautions built into this ship, Horx thought this would be the only way to destroy us without leaving evidence. He can claim a stray berg was tossed in our path, or some such tale.” Chives sniffed. “Not sportsmanlike at all, sir. Just what one would expect of a…a native.”

The cabin yawed. Flandry caught himself before he fell out of the bunk. At this gravity, to stumble across the room would be to break a leg. Thunders rolled. White vapors hissed up against crimson in the surviving screen.

“I’m not on to these scientific esoterica,” said Flandry. His chest pumped, struggling to supply oxygen for muscles toiling under nearly three times their normal weight. Each rib felt as if cast in lead. “But I’d guess what is happening is this. We maintain a temperature in here which for Jupiter is crazily high. So we’re radiating heat, which makes the ice go soft and—We’re slowly sinking into the berg.” He shrugged and got out a cigarette.

“Is that wise, sir?” asked Chives.

“The oxygen recyclers are still working,” said Flandry. “It’s not at all stuffy in here. Air is the least of our worries.” His coolness cracked over, he smote a fist on the wall and said between his teeth: “It’s this being helpless! We can’t go out of the cabin, we can’t do a thing but sit here and take it!”

“I wonder, sir.” Slowly, his thin face sagging with gravity, Chives pulled himself to the pack of equipment. He pawed through it. “No, sir. I regret to say I took no radio. It seemed we could communicate through the pilot.” He paused. “Even if we did find a way to signal, I daresay any Ymirite who received our call would merely interpret it as random static.”

Flandry stood up, somehow. “What do we have?” A tiny excitement shivered along his nerves. Outside, Jupiter boomed at him.

“Various detectors, sir, to check for installations. A pair of spacesuits. Side-arms. Your burglar kit, though I confess uncertainty what value it would have here. A microrecorder. A—"

"Wait a minute!"

Flandry sprang toward his valet. The floor rocked beneath him. He staggered toward the far wall. Chives shot out his tail and helped brake the man. Shaking, Flandry eased himself down and went on all fours to the corner where the Shalmuan squatted.

He didn't even stop to gibe at his own absentmindedness. His heart thuttered. "Wait a minute, Chives," he said. "We've got an airlock over there. Since the force-bubble necessarily reinforces its structure, it must still be intact; and its machinery can open the valves even against this outside pressure. Of course, we can't go through ourselves. Our space armor would be squashed flat. But we can get at the mechanism of the lock. It also, by logical necessity, has to be part of the Terra-conditioned system. We can use the tools we have here to make a simple automatic cycle. First the outer valve opens. Then it shuts, the Jovian air is exhausted from the chamber and Terrestrial air replaces same. Then the valve opens again…and so on. Do you see?"

"No, sir," said Chives. A deadly physical exhaustion filmed his yellow eyes. "My brain feels so thick…I regret—"

"A signal!" yelled Flandry. "We flush oxygen out into a hydrogen-cum-methane atmosphere. We supply an electric spark in the lock chamber to ignite the mixture. Whoosh! A flare! Feeble and blue enough—but not by Jovian standards. Any Ymirite anywhere within tens of kilometers is bound to see it as brilliant as we see a magnesium torch. And it'll repeat. A steady cycle, every four or five minutes. If the Ymirites aren't made of concrete, they'll be curious enough to investigate…and when they find the wreck on this berg, they'll guess our need and—"

His voice trailed off. Chives said dully. "Can we spare the oxygen, sir?"

"We'll have to," said Flandry. "We'll sacrifice as much as we can stand, and then halt the cycle. If nothing has happened after several hours, we'll expend half of what's left in one last fireworks." He took an ultimate pull on his cigarette, ground it out with great care, and fought back to his feet. "Come on, let's get going. What have we to lose?"

The floor shook. It banged and crashed outside. A fog of free radicals drifted green past the window, and the red iceberg spun in Jupiter's endless gale.

Flandry glanced at Chives. "You have one fault, laddy," he said, forcing a smile to his lips. "You aren't a beautiful woman." And then, after a moment, sighing: "However, it's just as well. Under the circumstances."

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And in that well-worn nick of time, which goes to prove that the gods, understandably, love me, help arrived. An Ymirite party spotted our flare. Having poked around, they went off, bringing back another force-bubble ship to which we transferred our nearly suffocated carcasses. No, Junior, I don't know what the Ymirites were doing in the Red Spot area. It must be a dank cold place for them too. But I had guessed they would be sure to maintain some kind of monitors, scientific stations, or what have you around there, just as we monitor the weather-breeding regions of Terra

Governor Thua didn't bother to apologize. He didn't even notice my valet's indignant demand that the miscreant Horx be forthwith administered a red-ice shaft, except to say that future visitors would be given a different guide (how can they tell?) and that this business was none *of his doing and he wouldn't waste any Ymirite's time with investigations or punishments or any further action at all. He pointed out the treaty provision, that he wasn't bound to admit us, and that any visits would always be at the visitor's own risk.*

The fact that some Ymirites did rescue us proves that the conspiracy, if any, does not involve their whole race. But how highly placed the hostile individuals are in their government (if they have anything corresponding to government as we know it)—I haven't the groggiest.

Above summary for convenience only. Transcript of all conversation, which was taped as per ungentlemanly orders, attached.

Yes, Junior, you may leave the room.

Flandry switched off the recorder. He could trust the confidential secretary, who would make a formal report out of his dictation, to clean it up. Though he wished she wouldn't.

He leaned back, cocked feet on desk, trickled smoke through his nostrils, and looked out the clear wall of his office. Admiralty Center gleamed, slim faerie spires in soft colors, reaching for the bright spring-time sky of Terra. You couldn't mount guard across 400 lightyears without millions of ships; and that meant millions of policy makers, scientists, engineers, strategists, tacticians, coordinators, clerks…and they had families, which needed food, clothing, houses, schools, amusements…so the heart of the Imperial Navy became a city in its own right. *Damn company town,* thought Flandry. And yet, when the bombs finally roared out of space, when the barbarians howled among smashed buildings and the smoke of burning books hid dead men in tattered bright uniforms—when the Long Night came, as it would, a century or a millennium hence, what difference?—something of beauty and gallantry would have departed the universe.

To hell with it. Let civilization hang together long enough for Dominic Flandry to taste a few more vintages, ride a few more horses, kiss a lot more girls and sing another ballad or two. That would suffice. At least, it was all he dared hope for.

The intercom chimed. "Admiral Fenross wants to see you immediately, sir."

"Now he tells me," grunted Flandry. "I wanted to see him yesterday, when I got back."

"He was busy then, sir," said the robot, as glibly as if it had a conscious mind. "His lordship the Earl of Sidrath is visiting Terra, and wished to be conducted through the operations center."

Flandry rose, adjusted his peacock-blue tunic, admired the crease of his gold-frogged white trousers, and covered his sleek hair with a jewel-banded officer's cap. "Of course," he said, "Admiral Fenross couldn't possibly delegate the tour to an aide."

"The Earl of Sidrath is related to Grand Admiral the Duke of Asia," the robot reminded him.

Flandry sang beneath his breath, *"Brown is the color of my true love's nose,"* and went out the door. After a series of slide-ways and gravshafts, he reached Fenross' office.

The admiral nodded his close-cropped head beyond the desk. "There you are." His tone implied Flandry had stopped for a beer on the way. "Sit down. Your preliminary verbal report on the Jovian mission has been communicated to me. Is that really all you could find out?"

Flandry smiled. "You told me to get an indication, one way or another, of the Ymirite attitude, sir," he purred. "That's what I got: an indication, one way or another."

Fenross gnawed his lip. "All right, all right. I should have known, I guess. Your forte never was working with an organization, and we're going to need a special project, a very large project, to learn the truth about Ymir."

Flandry sat up straight. "Don't," he said sharply.

"What?"

"Don't waste men that way. Sheer arithmetic will defeat them. Jupiter alone has the area of a hundred Terras. The population must be more or less proportional. How are our men going to percolate around, confined to the two or three spaceships that Thua has available for them? Assuming Thua doesn't simply refuse to admit any further oxygen-breathing nuisances. How are they going to question, bribe, eavesdrop, get any single piece of information? It's a truism that the typical Intelligence job consists of gathering a million unimportant little facts and fitting them together into one big fact. We've few enough agents as is, spread ghastly thin. Don't tie them up in an impossible job. Let them keep working on Merseia, where they've a chance of accomplishing something!"

"And if Ymir suddenly turns on us?" snapped Fenross.

"Then we roll with the punch. Or we die." Flandry shrugged and winced; his muscles were still sore from the pounding they had taken. "But haven't you thought, sir, this whole business may well be a Merseian stunt—to divert our attention from them, right at this crisis? It's exactly the sort of bear trap Aycharaych loves to set."

"That may be," admitted Fenross. "But Merseia lies beyond Syrax; Jupiter is next door. I've been given to understand that His Imperial Majesty is alarmed enough to desire—" He shrugged too, making it the immemorial gesture of a baffled underling.

"Who dropped that hint?" drawled Flandry. "Surely not the Earl of Sidrath, whom you were showing the sights yesterday while the news came in that Vixen had fallen?"

"Shut up!" Almost, it was a scream. A jag of pain went over Fenross' hollowed countenance. He reached for a pill. "If I didn't oblige the peerage," he said thickly, "I'd be begging my bread in Underground and someone would be in this office who'd never tell them no."

Flandry paused. He started a fresh cigarette with unnecessary concentration. *I suppose I am being unjust to him,* he thought. *Poor devil. It can't be much fun being Fenross.*

Still, he reflected, Aycharaych had left the Solar System so smoothly that the space ambush had never even detected his boat. Twenty-odd hours ago, a battered scoutship had limped in to tell the Imperium that Vixen had perforce surrendered to its nameless besiegers, who had landed *en masse* after reducing the defenses. The last dispatch from Syrax described clashes which had cost the Terrans more ships than the Merseians. Jupiter blazed a mystery in the evening sky. Rumor said that after his human guests had left, Ruethen and his staff had rolled out huge barrels of bitter ale and caroused like trolls for many hours; they must have known some reason to be merry.

You couldn't blame Fenross much. But would the whole long climb of man, from jungle to stars, fall back in destruction—and no single person even deserve to have his knuckles rapped for it?

"What about the reinforcements that were being sent to Vixen?" asked Flandry.

"They're still on their way." Fenross gulped his pill and relaxed a trifle. "What information we have, about enemy strength and so on, suggests that another standoff will develop. The aliens won't be strong enough to kick our force out of the system—"

"Not with Tom Walton in command. I hear he is." A very small warmth trickled into Flandry's soul.

"Yes. At the same time, now the enemy is established on Vixen, there's no obvious way to get them off without total blasting—which would sterilize the planet. Of course, Walton can try to cut their supply lines and starve them out; but once they get their occupation organized, Vixen itself will supply them. Or he can try to find out where they come from, and counter-attack their home. Or perhaps he can negotiate something. I don't know. The Emperor himself gave Admiral Walton what amounts to carte blanche."

It must have been one of His Majesty's off days, decided Flandry. *Actually doing the sensible thing.*

"Our great handicap is that our opponents know all about us and we know almost nothing about them," went on Fenross. I'm afraid the primary effort of our Intelligence must be diverted toward Jupiter for the time being. But someone has to gather information at Vixen too, about the aliens." His voice jerked to a halt.

Flandry filled his lungs with smoke, held it a moment, and let it out in a slow flood. "Eek," he said tonelessly.

"Yes. That's your next assignment."

"But…me, alone, to Vixen? Surely Walton's force carries a bunch of our people."

"Of course. They'll do what they can. But parallel operations are standard espionage procedure, as even you must know. Furthermore, the Vixenites made the dramatic rather than the logical gesture. After their planet had capitulated, they got one boat out, with one person aboard. The boat didn't try to reach any Terrestrial ship within the system. That was wise, because the tiny force Aldebaran had sent was already broken in battle and reduced to sneak raids. But neither did the Vixenite boat go to Aldebaran itself. No, it came straight here, and the pilot expected a personal audience with the Emperor."

"And didn't get it," foretold Flandry. "His Majesty is much too busy gardening to waste time on a mere commoner representing a mere planet."

"Gardening?" Fenross blinked.

"I'm told His Majesty cultivates beautiful pansies," murmured Flandry.

Fenross gulped and said in great haste: "Well, no, of course not. I mean, I myself interviewed the pilot, and read the report carried along. Not too much information, though helpful. However, while Walton has a few Vixenite refugees along as guides and advisors, this pilot is the only one who's seen the aliens close up, on the ground, digging in and trading rifle shots with humans; has experienced several days of occupation before getting away. Copies of the report can be sent after Walton. But that first-hand knowledge of enemy behavior, regulations, all the little unpredictable details…that may also prove essential."

"Yes," said Flandry. "If a spy is to be smuggled back onto Vixen's surface. Namely me."

Fenross allowed himself a prim little smile. "That's what I had in mind."

Flandry nodded, unsurprised. Fenross would never give up trying to get him killed. Though in all truth, Dominic Flandry doubtless had more chance of pulling such a stunt and getting back unpunctured than anyone else.

He said idly: “The decision to head straight for Sol wasn’t illogical. If the pilot had gone to Aldebaran, then Aldebaran would have sent us a courier reporting the matter and asking for orders. A roundabout route. This way, we got the news days quicker. No, that Vixenite has a level head on his shoulders.”

“Hers,” corrected Fenross.

“Huh?” Flandry sat bolt upright.

“She’ll explain any details,” said Fenross. “I’ll arrange an open requisition for you: draw what equipment you think you’ll need. And if you survive, remember, I’ll want every millo’s worth accounted for. Now get out and get busy! I’ve got work to do.”

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The *Hooligan* snaked out of Terran sky, ran for a time on primary drive at an acceleration which it strained the internal grav-field to compensate for, and, having reached a safe distance from Sol, sprang over into secondary. Briefly the view-screens went wild with Doppler effect and aberration. Then their circuits adapted to the rate at which the vessel pulsed in and out of normal space-time-energy levels; they annulled the optics of pseudo-speed, and Flandry looked again upon cold many-starred night as if he were at rest.

He left Chives in the turret to make final course adjustments and strolled down to the saloon. “All clear,” he smiled. “Estimated time to Vixen, thirteen standard days.”

“What?” The girl, Catherine Kittredge, half rose from the luxuriously cushioned bench. “But it took me a month the other way, an’ I had the fastest racer on our planet.”

"I've tinkered with this one," said Flandry, "Or, rather, found experts to do so." He sat down near her, crossing long legs and leaning an elbow on the mahogany table which the bench half-circled. "Give me a screwdriver and I'll make any firearm in the cosmos sit up and speak. But space drives have an anatomy I can only call whimsical."

He was trying to put her at ease. Poor kid, she had seen her home assailed, halfway in from the Imperial marches that were supposed to bear all the wars; she had seen friends and kinfolk slain in battle with unhuman unknowns, and heard the boots of an occupying enemy racket in once-familiar streets; she had fled to Terra like a child to its mother, and been coldly interviewed in an office and straightway bundled back onto a spaceship, with one tailed alien and one suave stranger. Doubtless an official had told her she was a brave little girl and now it was her duty to return as a spy and quite likely be killed. And meanwhile rhododendrons bloomed like cool fire in Terra's parks, and the laughing youth of Terra's aristocracy flew past on their way to some newly opened pleasure house.

No wonder Catherine Kittredge's eyes were wide and bewildered.

They were her best feature, Flandry decided: large, set far apart, a gold-flecked hazel under long lashes and thick dark brows. Her hair would have been nice too, a blonde helmet, if she had not cut it off just below the ears. Otherwise she was nothing much to look at—a broad, snub-nosed, faintly freckled countenance, generous mouth and good chin. As nearly as one could tell through a shapeless gray coverall, she was of medium height and on the stocky side. She spoke Anglic with a soft regional accent that sounded good in her low voice; but all her mannerisms were provincial, fifty years out of date. Flandry wondered a little desperately what they could talk about.

Well, there was business enough. He flicked buttons for autoservice. “What are you drinking?” he asked. “We’ve anything within reason, and a few things out of reason, on board.”

She blushed. “Nothin’, thank you,” she mumbled.

“Nothing at all? Come, now. Daiquiri? Wine? Beer? Buttermilk, for heaven’s sake?”

“Hm?” She raised a fleeting glance. He discovered Vixen had no dairy industry, cattle couldn’t survive there, and dialed ice cream for her. He himself slugged down a large gin-and-bitters. He was going to need alcohol —two weeks alone in space with Little Miss Orphan!

She was pleased enough by discovering ice cream to relax a trifle. Flandry offered a cigarette, was refused, and started one for himself. “You’ll have plenty of time to brief me en route,” he said, “so don’t feel obliged to answer questions now, if it distresses you.”

Catherine Kittredge looked beyond him, out the viewscreen and into the frosty sprawl of Andromeda.

Her lips twitched downward, ever so faintly. But she replied with a steadiness he liked: “Why not? ’Twon’t bother me more’n sittin’ an’ broodin’.”

“Good girl. Tell me, how did you happen to carry the message?”

“My brother was our official courier. You know how ’tis on planets like ours, without much population or money: whoever’s got the best spaceship gets a subsidy an’ carries any special dispatches. I helped him. We used to go off jauntin’ for days at a time, an’—No,” she broke off. Her fists closed. “I *won’t* bawl. The aliens forced a landin’. Hank went off with our groun’ forces. He didn’t come back. Sev’ral days after the surrender, when things began to settle down a little, I got the news he’d been killed in action. A few of us decided the Imperium had better be given what information we could supply. Since I knew Hank's ship best, they tol' me to go."

"I see." Flandry determined to keep this as dry as possible, for her sake. "I've a copy of the report your people made up, of course, but you had all the way to Sol to study it, so you must know more about it than anyone else off Vixen. Just to give me a rough preliminary idea, I understand some of the invaders knew Anglic and there was a certain amount of long-range parleying. What did they call themselves?"

"Does that matter?" she asked listlessly.

"Not in the faintest, at the present stage of things, except that it's such a weary cliche to speak of Planet X."

She smiled, a tiny bit. "They called themselves the Ardazirho, an' we gathered the *ho* was a collective endin'. So we figure their planet is named Ardazir. Though I can't come near pronouncin' it right."

Flandry took a stereopic from the pocket of his iridescent shirt. It had been snapped from hiding, during the ground battle. Against a background of ruined human homes crouched a single enemy soldier. Warrior? Acolyte? Unit? Armed, at least, and a killer of men.

Preconceptions always got in the way. Flandry's first startled thought had been *Wolf.* Now he realized that of course the Ardazirho was not lupine, didn't even look notably wolfish. Yet the impression lingered. He was not surprised when Catherine Kittredge said the aliens had gone howling into battle.

They were described as man-size bipeds, but digitigrade, which gave their feet almost the appearance of a dog's walking on its hind legs. The shoulders and arms were very humanoid, except that the thumbs were on the opposite side of the hands from mankind's. The head, arrogantly held on a powerful neck, was long and narrow for an intelligent animal, with a low forehead, most of the brain space behind the pointed ears. A black-nosed muzzle, not as sharp as a wolf 's and yet somehow like it, jutted out of the face. Its lips were pulled back in a snarl, showing bluntly pointed fangs which suggested a flesh-eater turned omnivore. The eyes were oval, close set, and gray as sleet. Short thick fur covered the entire body, turning to a ruff at the throat; it was rusty red.

"Is this a uniform?" asked Flandry.

The girl leaned close to see. The pictured Ardazirho wore a sort of kilt, in checkerboard squares of various hues. Flandry winced at some of the combinations: rose next to scarlet, a glaring crimson offensively between two delicate yellows. "Barbarians indeed," he muttered. "I hope Chives can stand the shock." Otherwise the being was dressed in boots of flexible leather and a harness from which hung various pouches and equipment. He was armed with what was obviously a magnetronic rifle, and had a wicked-looking knife at his belt.

"I'm not sure," said the girl. "Either they don't use uniforms at all, or they have such a variety that we've not made any sense of it. Some might be dressed more or less like him, others in a kind o' tunic an' burnoose, others in breastplates an' fancy plumed helmets."

"Him," pounced Flandry. "They're all male, then?"

"Yes, sir, seems that way. The groun' fightin' lasted long enough for our biologists to dissect an' analyze a few o' their dead. Accordin' to the report, they're placental mammals. It's clear they're from a more or less terrestroid planet, probably with a somewhat stronger gravity. The eye structure suggests their sun is bright, type A5 or thereabouts. That means they should feel pretty much at home in our badlands." Catherine Kittredge shrugged sadly. "Figure that's why they picked us to start on."

"They might have been conquering for some time," said Flandry. "A hot star like an A5 is no use to humans; and I imagine the F-type like yours is about as cool as they care for. They may well have built up a little coterminous kingdom, a number of B, A, and F suns out in your quadrant, where we don't even have a complete astronomical mapping—let alone having explored much...Hm. Didn't you get a chance to interrogate any live prisoners?"

"Yes. 'Twasn't much use. Durin' the fightin', one of our regiments did encircle a unit o' theirs an' knock it out with stun beams. When two o' them woke up an' saw they were captured, they died."

"Preconditioning," nodded Flandry. "Go on."

"The rest didn't speak any Anglic, 'cept one who'd picked up a little bit. They questioned him." The girl winced. "I don't figure 'twas very nice. The report says toward the end his heart kept stoppin' an' they'd revive it, but at last he died for good...Anyway, it seems a fair bet he was tellin' the truth. An' he didn't know where his home star was. He could understan' our coordinate system, an' translate it into the one they used. But that was zeroed arbitrarily on S Doradus, an' he didn't have any idea about the coordinates of Ardazir."

"Memory blank." Flandry scowled. "Probably given to all the enlisted ranks. Such officers as must retain full information are conditioned to die on capture. What a merry monarch they've got." He twisted his mustache between nervous fingers. "You know, though, this suggests their home is vulnerable. Maybe we should concentrate on discovering where it is."

The girl dropped her eyes. She lost a little color. “Do you think we can, my lord?” she whispered. “Or are we just goin’ to die too?”

“If the mission involves procedures illegal or immoral, I should have no trouble.” Flandry grinned at her. “You can do whatever honorable work is necessary. Between us, why, God help Ardazir. Incidentally, I don’t rate a title.”

“But they called you Sir Dominic.”

“A knighthood is not a patent of nobility. I’m afraid my relationship to the peerage involves a bar sinister. You see, one day my father wandered into this sinister bar, and—” Flandry rambled on, skirting the risque, until he heard her laugh. Then he laughed back and said: “Good girl! What do they call you at home? Kit, I’ll swear. Very well, we’re off to the wars, you the Kit and I the caboodle. Now let’s scream for Chives to lay out caviar and cheeses. Afterward I’ll show you to your stateroom.” Her face turned hot, and he added, “Its door locks on the inside.”

“Thank you,” she said, so low he could scarcely hear it. Smoky lashes fluttered on her cheeks. “When I was told to come—with you—I mean, I didn’t know—”

“My dear girl,” said Flandry, “credit me with enough experience to identify a holstered needle gun among more attractive curves beneath that coverall.”

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There was always something unreal about a long trip through space. Here, for a time, you were alone in the universe. No radio could outpace you and be received, even if unimaginable distance would not soon have drowned it in silence. No other signal existed, except another spaceship, and how would it find you unless your feeble drive-pulsations were by the merest chance detected? A whole fleet might travel many parsecs before some naval base sensed its wake with instruments; your one mote of a craft could hurtle to the ends of creation and never be heard. There was nothing to be seen, no landscape, no weather, simply the enormous endless pageantry of changing constellations, now and then a cold nebular gleam between flashing suns, the curdled silver of the Milky Way and the clotted stars near Sagittarius. Yet you in your shell were warm, dry, breathing sweet recycled air; on a luxury vessel like the *Hooligan,* you might listen to recorded Lysarcian bells, sip Namorian maoth and taste Terran grapes.

Flandry worked himself even less mercifully than he did Chives and Kit. It was the hard, dull grind which must underlie all their hopes: study, rehearsal, analysis of data, planning and discarding and planning again, until brains could do no more and thinking creaked to a halt. But then recreation became pure necessity—and they were two humans with one unobtrusive servant, cruising among the stars.

Flandry discovered that Kit could give him a workout, when they played handball down in the hold. And her stubborn chess game defeated his swashbuckling tactics most of the time. She had a puckish humor when she wasn't remembering her planet. Flandry would not soon forget her thumbnail impression of Vice Admiral Fenross: "A mind like a mousetrap, only he ought to let some o' those poor little mice go." She could play the lorr, her fingers dancing over its twelve primary strings with that touch which brings out the full ringing resonance of the secondaries; she seemed to know all the ballads from the old brave days when men were first hewing their homes out of Vixen's wilderness, and they were good to hear.

Flandry grew slowly aware that she was the opposite of bad-looking. She just hadn't been sculped into the monotonously aristocratic appearance of Terra's high-born ladies. The face, half boyish, was her own, the body full and supple where it counted. He swore dismally to himself and went on a more rigorous calisthenic program.

Slowly the stars formed new patterns. There came a time when Aldebaran stood like red flame, the brightest object in all heaven. And then the needle-point of Vixen's sun, the star named Cerulia, glistened keen and blue ahead. And Flandry turned from the viewscreen and said quietly: "Two more days to go. I think we'll have captain's dinner tonight."

"Very good, sir," said Chives. "I took it upon myself to bring along some live Maine lobster. And I trust the Liebfraumilch '51 will be satisfactory?"

"That's the advantage of having a Shalmuan for your batman," remarked Flandry to Kit. "Their race has more sensitive palates than ours. They can't go wrong on vintages."

She smiled, but her eyes were troubled.

Flandry retired to his own cabin and an argument. He wanted to wear a peach-colored tunic with his white slacks; Chives insisted that the dark blue, with a gold sash, was more suitable. Chives won, naturally. The man wandered into the saloon, which was already laid out for a feast, and poured himself an aperitif. Music sighed from the recorder, nothing great but sweet to hear.

A footfall came lightly behind him. He turned and nearly dropped his glass. Kit was entering in a sheer black dinner gown; one veil the color of fire flickered from her waistline. A filigree tiara crowned shining hair, and a bracelet of Old Martian silver coiled massive on her wrist.

“Great hopping electrons,” gasped Flandry. “Don’t *do* such things without warning! Where did the paintbrush come from to lay on the glamor that thick?”

Kit chuckled and pirouetted. “Chives,” she said. “Who else? He’s a darlin’. He brought the jew’lry along, an’ he’s been makin’ the dress at odd moments this whole trip.”

Flandry shook his head and clicked his tongue. “If Chives would accept manumission, he could set himself up in business, equipping lady spies to seduce poor officers like me. He’d own the galaxy in ten years.”

Kit blushed and said hastily: “Did he select the tape too? I always have loved Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto.”

“Oh, is that what it is? Nice music for a sentimental occasion, anyway. My department is more the administration of drinks. I prescribe this before dinner: Ansan aurea. Essentially, it’s a light dry vermouth, but for once a non-Terran soil has improved the flavor of a Terran plant.”

She hesitated. “I don’t—I never—”

“Well, high time you began.” He did not glance at the view-screen, where Cerulia shone like steel, but they both knew there might not be many hours left for them to savor existence. She took the glass, sipped, and sighed.

“Thank you, Dominic. I’ve been missin’ out on such a lot.”

They seated themselves. “We’ll have to make that up, after this affair is over,” said Flandry. A darkening passed through him, just long enough to make him add: “However, I suspect that on the whole you’ve done better in life than I.”

“What do you mean?” Her eyes, above the glass, reflected the wine’s hue and became almost golden.

“Oh…hard to say.” His mouth twisted ruefully upward. “I’ve no romantic illusions about the frontier. I’ve seen too much of it. I’d a good deal rather loll in bed sipping my morning chocolate than bounce into the fields before dawn to cultivate the grotch or scag the thimbs or whatever dreary technicalities it is that pioneers undergo. And yet, well, I’ve no illusions about my own class either, or my own way of life. You frontier people are the healthy ones. You’ll be around—most of you—long after the Empire is a fireside legend. I envy you that.”

He broke off. “Pardon me. I’m afraid spiritual jaundice is an occupational disease in my job.”

“Which I’m still not sure what is—Oh, dear.” Kit chuckled. “Does alcohol act that fast? But really, Dominic, I wish you’d talk a little about your work. All you’ve said is, you’re in Naval Intelligence. I’d like to know what you do.”

“Why?” he asked.

She flushed and blurted: “To know you better.”

Flandry saw her confusion and moved to hide it from them both: “There’s not a lot to tell. I’m a field agent, which means I go out and peek through windows instead of sitting in an office reading the reports of window peekers. Thanks to the circumstance that my immediate superior doesn’t like me, I spend most of my working time away from Terra, on what amounts to a roving commission. Good old Fenross. If he was ever replaced by some kindly father-type who dealt justly with all subordinates, I’d dry up and blow away.”

“I think that’s revoltin’.” Anger flashed in her voice.

“What? The discrimination? But my dear lass, what is any civilization but an elaborate structure of special privileges? I’ve learned to make my way around among them. Good frogs, d'you think I *want* a nice secure desk job with a guaranteed pension?"

"But still, Dominic—a man like you, riskin' his life again an' again, sent almost alone against all Ardazir…because someone doesn't like you!" Her face still burned, and there was a glimmer of tears in the hazel eyes.

"Hard to imagine how that could be," said Flandry with calculated smugness. He added, lightly and almost automatically: "But after all, think what an outrageous special privilege your personal heredity represents, so much beauty, charm, and intelligence lavished on one little girl."

She grew mute, but faintly she trembled. With a convulsive gesture, she tossed off her glass.

Easy, boy, thought Flandry. A not unpleasurable alertness came to life. *Emotional scenes are the last thing we want out here.* "Which brings up the general topic of you," he said in his chattiest tone. "A subject well worth discussing over the egg flower soup which I see Chives bringing in… or any other course, for that matter. Let's see, you were a weather engineer's assistant for a living, isn't that right? Sounds like fun, in an earnest high-booted way. *And might prove useful,* added that part of him which never took a vacation.

She nodded, as anxious as he to escape what they had skirted. They took pleasure in the meal, and talked of many things. Flandry confirmed his impression that Kit was not an unsophisticated peasant. She didn't know the latest delicious gossip about you-know-who and that actor. But she had measured the seasons of her strange violent planet; she could assemble a machine so men could trust their lives to it; she had hunted and sported, seen birth and death; the intrigues of her small city were as subtle as any around the Imperial throne. Withal, she had the innocence of most frontier folk—or call it optimism, or honor, or courage—at any rate, she had not begun to despair of the human race.

But because he found himself in good company, and this was a special occasion, he kept both their glasses filled. After a while he lost track of how many times he had poured.

When Chives cleared the table and set out coffee and liqueur, Kit reached eagerly for her cup. “I need this,” she said, not quite clearly. “’Fraid I had too much to drink.”

“That was the general idea,” said Flandry. He accepted a cigar from Chives. The Shalmuan went noiselessly out. Flandry looked across the table. Kit sat with her back to the broad viewscreen, so that the stars were jewels clustered around her tiara.

“I don’t believe it,” she said after a moment.

“You’re probably right,” said Flandry. “What don’t you believe?”

“What you were sayin’…’bout the Empire bein’ doomed.”

“It’s better not to believe that,” he said gently.

“Not because o’ Terra,” she said. She leaned forward. The light was soft on her bare young shoulders.

“The little bit I saw there was a hard blow. But Dominic, as long’s the Empire has men like, like you—we’ll take on the whole universe an’ win.”

“Blessings,” said Flandry in haste.

“No.” Her eyes were the least bit hazed, but they locked steadily with his. She smiled, more in tenderness than mirth. “You won’t wriggle off the hook with a joke this time, Dominic. You gave me too much to drink, you see, an’—I mean it. A planet with you on its side has still got hope enough.”

Flandry sipped his liqueur. Suddenly the alcohol touched his own brain with its pale fires, and he thought, *Why not be honest with her? She can take it. Maybe she even deserves it.*

“No, Kit,” he said. “I know my class from the inside out, because it is my class and I probably wouldn’t choose another even if some miracle made me able to. But we’re hollow, and corrupt, and death has marked us for its own. In the last analysis, however we disguise it, however strenuous and hazardous and even lofty our amusements are, the only reason we can find for living is to have fun. And I’m afraid that isn’t reason enough.”

“But it is!” she cried.

“You think so,” he said, “because you’re lucky, enough to belong to a society which still has important jobs uncompleted. But we aristocrats of Terra, we enjoy life instead of enjoying what we’re doing…and there’s a cosmos of difference.

“The measure of our damnation is that every one of us with any intelligence—and there are some—every one sees the Long Night coming. We’ve grown too wise; we’ve studied a little psycho-dynamics, or perhaps only read a lot of history, and we can see that Manuel’s Empire was not a glorious resurgence. It was the Indian summer of Terran civilization. (But you’ve never seen Indian summer, I suppose. A pity: no planet has anything more beautiful and full of old magics.) Now even that short season is past. Autumn is far along; the nights are cold and the leaves are fallen and the last escaping birds call through a sky which has lost all color. And yet, we who see winter coming can also see it won’t be here till after our lifetimes…so we shiver a bit, and swear a bit, and go back to playing with a few bright dead leaves.”

He stopped. Silence grew around them. And then, from the intercom, music began again, a low orchestral piece which spoke to deep places of their awareness.

“Excuse me,” said Flandry. “I really shouldn’t have wished my sour pessimism on you.”

Her smile this time held a ghost of pity. “An’ o’ course ’twouldn’t be debonair to show your real feelin’s, or try to find words for them.”

“Touché!” He cocked his head. “Think we could dance to that?”

“The music? Hardly. The *Liebestod* is background for somethin’ else. I wonder if Chives knew.”

“Hm?” Flandry looked surprised at the girl.

“I don’t mind at all,” she whispered. “Chives is a darlin’.”

Suddenly he understood.

But the stars were chill behind her. Flandry thought of guns and dark fortresses waiting for them both. He thought of knightly honor, which would not take advantage of the helplessness which is youth—and then, with a little sadness, he decided that practical considerations were what really turned the balance for him.

He raised the cigar to his mouth and said softly, “Better drink your coffee before it gets cold, lass.”

With that the moment was safely over. He thought he saw disappointed gratitude in Kit’s hurried glance, but wasn’t sure. She turned around, gazing at the stars merely to avoid facing him for the next few seconds.

Her breath sighed outward. She sat looking at Cerulia for a whole minute. Then she stared down at her hands and said tonelessly: “Figure you’re right ’bout the Empire. But then what’s to become o’ Vixen?”

"We'll liberate it, and squeeze a fat indemnity out of Ardazir," said Flandry as if there were no doubt.

"Uh-uh." She shook her head. Bitterness began to edge her voice. "Not if 'tisn't convenient. Your Navy might decide to fight the war out where 'tis. An' then my whole planet, my people, the little girl next door an' her kitten, trees an' flowers an' birds, why, 'twill just be radioactive ash blowin' over dead gray hills. Or maybe the Imperium will decide to compromise, an' let Ardazir keep Vixen. Why not? What's one planet to the Empire? A swap might, as you say, buy them peace in their own lifetimes. A few million human bein's, that's nothin', write them off in red ink." She shook her head again in a dazed way. "Why are we goin' there, you an' I? What are we workin' for? Whatever we do can come to nothin', from one stroke of a pen in some bored bureaucrat's hand. Can't it?"

"Yes," said Flandry.

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Cerulia, being a main-sequence star, did not need vastly more mass than Sol to shine more fiercely. Vixen, the fourth planet out, circled its primary in one and a half standard years, along such an orbit that it received, on the average, about as much radiation as Terra.

"The catch lies in that word 'average,'" murmured Flandry.

He floated in the turret with Chives, hands on the control panel and body weightless in a cocoon of pilot harness. To port, the viewscreens were dimmed, lest the harsh blue sun burn out his eyes. Elsewhere, distorted constellations sprawled stark against night. Flandry picked out the Jupiter-type planet called Ogre by the humans of Vixen: a bright yellow glow, its larger moons visible like sparks. And what were its Ymirite colonists thinking?

"Ogre's made enough trouble for Vixen all by itself," complained Flandry. "Its settlers ought to be content with that and not go plotting with Ardazir. If they are, I mean." He turned to Chives. "How's Kit taking this free-fall plunge?"

"I regret to say Miss Kittredge did not look very comfortable, sir," answered the Shalmuan. "But she said she was."

Flandry clicked his tongue. Since the advent of gravity control, there had been little need for civilians ever to undergo weightlessness; hence Kit, susceptible to it, didn't have the training that would have helped. Well, she'd be a lot sicker if an Ardazirho missile homed on the *Hooligan*. Nobody ever died of space nausea: no such luck!

Ardazir would undoubtedly have mounted tight guard over conquered Vixen. Flandry's detectors were confirming this The space around the planet quivered with primary-drive vibrations, patrolling warcraft, and there must be a network of orbital robot monitors to boot. A standard approach was certain to be spotted. There was another way to land, though, if you were enough of a pilot and had enough luck. Flandry had decided to go ahead with it, rather than contact Walton's task force. He couldn't do much there except report himself in…and then proceed to Vixen anyway, with still more likelihood of detection and destruction.

Engines cold, the *Hooligan* plunged at top meteoric velocity straight toward her goal. Any automaton was sure to register her as a siderite, and ignore her. Only visual observation would strip that disguise off; and space is so vast that even with the closest blockade, there was hardly a chance of passing that close to an unwarned enemy. Escape from the surface would be harder, but this present stunt was foolproof. Until you hit atmosphere!

Flandry watched Vixen swelling in the forward viewscreens. To one side Cerulia burned, ominously big. The planet's northern dayside was like a slice of incandescence; polarizing telescopes showed bare mountains, stony deserts, rivers gone wild with melted snows. In the southern hemisphere, the continents were still green and brown, the oceans deeply blue, like polished cobalt. But cloud banded that half of the world, storms marched roaring over hundreds of kilometers, lightning flared through rain. The equator was hidden under a nearly solid belt of cloud and gale. The northern aurora was cold flame; the south pole, less brilliant, still shook great banners of light into heaven. A single small moon, 100,000 kilometers from the surface, looked pale against that luminance.

The spaceship seemed tomb silent when Flandry switched his attention back to it. He said, just to make a noise, "And this passes for a terrestroid, humanly habitable planet. What real estate agents they must have had in the pioneer days!"

"I understand that the southern Cerulia IV is not unsalubrious most of the year, sir," said Chives. "It is only now, in fact, that the northern part becomes lethal."

Flandry nodded. Vixen was the goat of circumstance: huge Ogre had exactly four times the period, and thus over millions of years resonance had multiplied perturbation and bought the eccentricity of Vixen's orbit close to one-half. The planet's axial inclination was 24°, and northern midsummer fell nearly at periastron. Thus, every eighteen months, Cerulia scorched that hemisphere with fourfold the radiation Terra got from Sol. This section of the orbit was hastily completed, and most of Vixen's year was spent in cooler regions. "But I daresay the Ardazirho timed their invasion for right now," said Flandry. "If they're from an A-type star, the northern weather shouldn't be too hard on them."

He put out his final cigarette. The planet filled the bow screen. Robot mechanisms could do a lot, but now there must also be live piloting...or a streak in Vixen's sky and a crater blasted from its rock.

At the *Hooligan's* speed, she crossed the tenuous upper air layers and hit stratosphere in a matter of seconds. It was like a giant's fist. Flandry's harness groaned as his body hurtled forward. There was no outside noise, yet, but the flitter herself shrieked in metallic pain. The screens became one lurid fire, air heated to incandescence.

Flandry's arm trembled with weight. He slammed it down on the drive switches. Chives' slight form could not stir under these pressures, but the green tail darted, button to dial to vernier. Engines bellowed as they fought to shed velocity. The vessel glowed red; but her metal was crystallized to endure more than furnace heat. Thunder banged around her, within her. Flandry felt his ribs shoved towards his lungs, as direction shifted. Still he could only see flame outside. But his blurring eyes read instruments. He knew the vessel had levelled off, struck denser atmosphere, skipped like a stone, and was now rounding the planet in monstrous shuddering bounces.

First then did he have time to reactivate the internal compensators. A steady one gee poured its benediction through him. He drew uneven breath into an aching chest. "For this we get *paid?*" he mumbled.

While Chives took over, and the thermostat brought the turret near an endurable temperature, Flandry unbuckled and went below to Kit's stateroom. She lay unstirring in harness, a trickle of blood from the snub nose. He injected her with stimulol. Her eyes fluttered open. Briefly, she looked so young and helpless that he must glance away. “Sorry to jolt you back to consciousness in this fashion,” he said. “It’s bad practice. But right now, we need a guide.”

“O’ course.” She preceded him to the turret. He sat down and she leaned over his shoulder, frowning at the viewscreens. The *Hooligan* burrowed into atmosphere on a steep downward slant. The roar of cloven air boomed through the hull. Mountains rose jagged on a night horizon. “That’s the Ridge,” said Kit. “Head yonder, over Moonstone Pass.” On the other side, a shadowed valley gleamed with rivers, under stars and a trace of aurora. “There’s the Shaw, an’ the King’s Way cuttin’ through. Land anywhere near, ’tisn’t likely the boat will be found.”

The Shaw belied its name; it was a virgin forest, 40,000 square kilometers of tall trees. Flandry set his craft down so gently that not a twig was broken, cut the engines and leaned back. “Thus far,” he breathed gustily, “we is did it, chillun!”

“Sir,” said Chives, “may I once again take the liberty of suggesting that if you and the young lady go off alone, without me, you need a psychiatrist.”

“And may I once again tell you where to stick your head,” answered Flandry. “I’ll have trouble enough passing myself off as a Vixenite, without you along. You stay with the boat and keep ready to fight. Or, more probably, to scramble out of here like an egg.”

He stood up. “We’d better start now, Kit,” he added. “That drug won’t hold you up for very many hours.”

Both humans were already dressed in the soft green coveralls Chives had made according to Kit’s description of professional hunters. That would also explain Flandry’s little radio transceiver, knife and rifle; his accent might pass for that of a man lately moved here from the Avian Islands. It was a thin enough disguise…but the Ardazirho wouldn't have an eye for fine details. The main thing was to reach Kit's home city, Garth, undetected. Once based there, Flandry could assess the situation and start making trouble.

Chives wrung his hands, but bowed his master obediently out the air-lock. It was midwinter, but also periastron; only long nights and frequent rains marked the season in this hemisphere. The forest floor was thick and soft underfoot. Scant light came through the leaves, but here and there on the high trunks glowed yellow phosphorescent fungi, enough to see by. The air was warm, full of strange green scents. Out in the darkness there went soft whistlings, callings, croakings, patterings, once a scream which cut off in a gurgle, the sounds of a foreign wilderness.

It was two hours' hike to the King's Way. Flandry and Kit fell into the rhythm of it and spoke little. But when they finally came out on the broad starlit ribbon of road, her hand stole into his. "Shall we walk on?" she asked.

"Not if Garth is fifty kilometers to go," said Flandry. He sat down by the road's edge. She lowered herself into the curve of his arm.

"Are you cold?" he asked, feeling her shiver.

"'Fraid," she admitted.

His lips brushed hers. She responded shyly, unpracticed. It beat hiking. Or did it? *I never liked* hors d'oeuvres *alone for a meal,* thought Flandry, and drew her close.

Light gleamed far down the highway. A faint growl waxed. Kit disengaged herself. "Saved by the bell," murmured Flandry, "but don't stop to wonder which of us was." She laughed, a small and trembling sound beneath unearthly constellations.

Flandry got up and extended his arm. The vehicle ground to a halt: a ten-car truck. The driver leaned out. “Boun’ for Garth?” he called.

“That’s right.” Flandry helped Kit into the cab and followed. The truck started again, its train rumbling for 200 meters behind.

“Goin’ to turn in your gun, are you?” asked the driver. He was a burly bitter-faced man. One arm carried the traces of a recent blaster wound.

“Figure so,” Kit replied. “My husban’ an’ I been trekkin’ in the Ridge this last three months. We heard ’bout the invasion an’ started back, but floods held us up—rains, you know—an’ our radio’s given some trouble too. So we aren’t sure o’ what’s been happenin’.”

“Enough.” The driver spat out the window. He glanced sharply at them. “But what the gamma would anybody be doin’ in the mountains this time o’ year?”

Kit began to stammer. Flandry said smoothly, “Keep it confidential, please, but this is when the cone-tailed radcat comes off the harl. It’s dangerous, yes, but we’ve filled six caches of grummage.”

“Hm…uh…yeh. Sure. Well, when you reach Garth, better not carry your gun yourself to the wolf headquarters. They’ll most likely shoot you first an’ ask your intentions later. Lay it down somewhere an go ask one o’ them would he please be so kind as to come take it away from you.”

“I hate to give up this rifle,” said Flandry.

The driver shrugged. “Keep it, then, if you want to take the risk. But not aroun’ me. I fought at Burnt Hill, an’ played dead all night while those howlin’ devils hunted the remnants of our troop. Then I got home somehow, an’ that’s enough. I got a wife an’ children to keep.” He jerked his thumb backward. “Load o’ rare earth ore this trip. The wolves’ll take it, an’ Hobclen’s mill will turn it into fire-control elements for ’em, an’ they’ll shoot some more at the Empire’s ships. Sure, call me a quislin’—an’ then wait till you’ve seen your friends run screamin’ down your street with a pack o’ batsnakes flap-pin’ an’ snappin’ at them an’ the wolves boundin’ behind laughin’. Ask yourself if you want to go through that, for an Empire that’s given us up already.”

“Has it?” asked Flandry. “I understood from one ’cast that there were reinforcements coming.”

“Sure. They’re here. One o’ my chums has a pretty good radio an’ sort o’ followed the space battle when Walton’s force arrived, by receivin’ stray messages. It petered out pretty quick, though. What can Walton do, unless he attacks this planet, where the wolves are now based, where they’re already makin’ their own supplies an’ munitions? An’ if he does that—” The headlight reflections shimmered off sweat on the man’s face. “No more Vixen. Just a cinder. You pray God, chum, that the Terrans don’t try to blast Ardazir off Vixen.”

“What’s happening, then, in space?” asked Flandry.

He didn’t expect a coherent reply. To the civilian, as to the average fighter, war is one huge murky chaos. It was a pure gift when the driver said: “My chum caught radio ’casts beamed at us from the Terran fleet. The wolves tried to jam it, o’ course, but I heard, an’ figure ’tis mostly truth. Because ’tis bad enough! There was a lot o’ guff about keepin’ up our courage, an’ sabotagin’ the enemy, an’—” The driver rasped an obscenity. “Sorry, ma’m. But wait till you see what ’tis really like aroun’ Garth an’ you’ll know how I feel about that idea. Admiral Walton says his fleet’s seized some asteroid bases an’ theirs isn’t tryin’ to get him off ’em. Stalemate, you see, till the wolves have built up enough strength. Which they’re doin’, fast. The reason the admiral can’t throw everything he’s got against them in space is that he has to watch Ogre too. Seems there’s reason to suspect Ymir might be in cahoots with Ardazir. The Ymirites aren't sayin'. You know what they're like."

Flandry nodded. "Yes. 'If you will not accept our word that we are neutral, there is no obvious way to let you convince yourselves, since the whole Terran Empire could not investigate a fraction of Dispersal territory. Accordingly, we shall not waste our time discussing the question.'"

"That's it, chum. You've got the very tone. They might be honest, sure. Or they might be waitin' for the minute Walton eases up his watch on 'em, to jump him."

Flandry glanced out. The stars flashed impersonally, not caring that a few motes of flesh named them provinces for a few centuries. He saw that part of this planet's sky had no stars, a hole into forever. Kit had told him it was called the Hatch. But that was only a nearby dark nebula, not even a big one. The clear white spark of Rigel was more sinister, blazing from the heart of Merseia's realm. And what of Ogre, tawny above the trees?

"What do you think will happen?" Kit's voice could scarcely be heard through the engine grumble.

"I don't even dare guess," said the driver. "Maybe Walton'll negotiate something—might leave us here, to become wolf-cattle, or might arrange to evacuate us an' we can become beggars on Terra. Or he might fight in space… but even if he doesn't attack their forts here on Vixen, we'll all be hostages to Ardazir, won't we? Or the Ymirites might…No, ma'm, I'm just drivin' my truck an' drawin' my pay an' feedin' my family. Shorter rations every week, it seems. Figure there's nothin' else any one person can do. Is there?"

Kit began to cry, a soft hopeless sobbing on Flandry's shoulder. He laid an arm around her and they sat thus all the way to Garth.

-10-

Night again, after a short hot winter day full of thunderstorms. Flandry and Emil Bryce stood in the pit blackness of an alley, watching a nearly invisible street. Rain sluiced over their cloaks. A fold in Flandry's hood was letting water trickle in, his tunic was soaked, but he dared not move. At any moment now, the Ardazirho would come by.

The rain roared slow and heavy, down over the high-peaked roofs of Garth, through blacked-out streets and gurgling into the storm drains. All wind had stopped, but now and then lightning glared. There was a brief white view of pavement that shimmered wet, half-timbered houses with blind shutters crowded side by side, a skeletal transmitter tower for one of the robotic weather-monitor stations strewn over the planet. Then night clamped back down, and thunder went banging through enormous hollow spaces.

Emil Bryce had not moved for half an hour. But he really was a hunter by trade, thought Flandry. The Terran felt an unreasonable resentment of Bryce's guild. Damn them, it wasn't fair, in that trade they stood waiting for prey since they were boys—and *he* had to start cold. No, hot. It steamed beneath his rain cape.

Feet resounded on the walk. They did not have a human rhythm. And they did not smack the ground first with a boot-heel, but clicked metal-shod toes along the pavement. A flash-beam bobbed, slashing darkness with a light too blue and sharp for human comfort. Watery reflections touched Bryce's broad red face. His mouth alone moved, and Flandry could read fear upon it. *Wolves!*

But Bryce's dart gun slithered from under this cloak. Flandry eased steel knucks onto one hand. With the other, he gestured Bryce back. He, Flandry, must go first, pick out the precise enemy he wanted—in darkness, in rain, and all their faces nonhuman. Nor would uniforms help; the Ardazirho bore such a wild variety of dress.

But…Flandry was trained. It had been worth a rifle, to have an excuse for entering local invader headquarters. Their garrison in Garth was not large: a few hundred, for a city of a quarter million. But modern heavy weapons redressed that, robotanks, repeating cannon, the flat announcement that any town where a human uprising actually succeeded would be missiled. (The glassy crater which had been Marsburg proved it.) The Garth garrison was there chiefly to man observation posts and anti-spacecraft defenses in the vicinity; but they also collected firearms, directed factories to produce for their army, prowled in search of any citizens with spirit left to fight. Therefore, Flandry told himself, their chief officer must have a fair amount of knowledge—and the chief officer spoke Anglic, and Flandry had gotten a good look at him while surrendering the rifle, and Flandry was trained to tell faces apart, even nonhuman faces—

And now Clanmaster Temulak, as he had called himself, was going off duty, from headquarters to barracks. Bryce and others had been watching the Ardazirho for weeks. They had told Flandry that the invaders went on foot, in small armed parties, whenever practicable. Nobody knew quite why. Maybe they preferred the intimacy with odors and sounds which a vehicle denied; it was known they had better noses than man. Or perhaps they relished the challenge: more than once, humans had attacked such a group, been beaten off and hunted down and torn to pieces. Civilians had no chance against body armor, blast-weapons, and reflexes trained for combat.

But I'm not a civilian, Flandry told himself, *and Bryce has some rather special skills.*

The quarry passed by. Scattered flashbeam light etched the ruffed, muzzled heads against flowing dimness. There were five. Flandry identified Temulak, helmeted and corseleted, near the middle. He glided out of the alley, behind them.

The Ardazirho whipped about. How keen were their ears? Flandry kept going. One red-furred alien hand dropped toward a bolstered blaster. Flandry smashed his steel-knuckled fist at Temulak's face. The enemy bobbed his head, the knucks clanged off the helmet. And light metal sheathed his belly, no blow would have effect there. The blaster came out. Flandry chopped down his left palm, edge on, with savage precision. He thought he felt wristbones crack beneath it. Temulak's gun clattered to the pavement. The Ardazirho threw back his head and howled, ululating noise hurled into the rain. And HQ only half a kilometer away, barracks no further in the opposite direction—

Flandry threw a karate kick to the jaw. The officer staggered back. But he was quick, twisting about to seize the man's ankle before it withdrew They went down together. Temulak's right hand still hung useless, but his left snatched for Flandry's throat. The Terran glimpsed fingernails reinforced with sharp steel plectra. He threw up an arm to keep his larynx from being torn out. Temulak howled again. Flandry chopped at the hairy neck. The Ardazirho ducked and sank teeth into Flandry's wrist. Anguish went like flame along the nerves. But now Temulak was crouched before him. Flandry slammed down a rabbit punch. Temulak slumped. Flandry got on his back and throttled him.

Looking up, gasping, the man saw shadows leap and yell in the glow of the dropped flashlight. There had been no way to simply needle Temulak. He was wanted alive, and Flandry didn't know what anesthetics might be fatal to an Ardazirho. But Bryce had only to kill the guards, as noiselessly as possible. His airgun spat cyanide darts, quick death for any oxygen breather. And his skilled aim sent those darts into exposed flesh, not uselessly breaking on armor. Two shapes sprawled in the street. Another had somehow jumped for Bryce's throat. The hunter brought up one boot. It clanged on a breastplate, but sheer force sent the alien lurching backward. Bryce shot him. By then the last one had freed his blaster. It crashed and blazed through rain. Bryce had already dropped. The ion bolt sizzled where he had been. Bryce fired, missed, rolled away from another blast, fired again and missed. Now howling could be heard down the street, as a pack of invaders rallied to come and help.

Flandry reached across Temulak's gaunt body, picked up the Clanmaster's gun, and waited. He was nearly blind in this night. The other Ardazirho's blaster flamed once more. Flandry fired where it showed. The alien screamed, once, and thudded to the street. Scorched hair and meat smoked sickly in the wet air.

"Out o' here!" gasped Bryce. He sprang erect. "They're comin'! An' they'll track us by scent—"

"I came prepared for *that,*" said Flandry. A brief hard grin peeled his teeth. He let Bryce pick up Temulak while he got a flat plastibottle from his tunic. He turned a pressure nozzle and sprayed a liter of gasoline around the area. "If their noses are any good for several minutes after this, I give up. Let's go."

Bryce led the way, through the alley to the next street, down a block of horribly open paving, then hand-over-hand across a garden wall. No private human vehicles could move after dark without being shot at from the air, but it wasn't far to the underground hideout. In fact, too close, thought Flandry. But then, who on Vixen had any experience with such operations? Kit had looked up those friends in Garth who smuggled her out, and they had led Flandry straight to their bitter little organization. It expedited matters this time, yes, but suppose the Ardazirho had supplied a ringer? Or…it was only a matter of time before they started questioning humans in detail, under drugs and duress. Then you needed cells, changing passwords, widely scattered boltholes, or your underground was done for.

Flandry stumbled through drenched flowerbeds. He helped Bryce carry Temulak down into the hurricane cellar: standard for every house in Garth. A tunnel had been dug from this one; its door, at least, was well concealed. Flandry and Bryce groped for several hundred meters to the other end. They emerged beneath a house whose address they should not have been permitted to know.

Judith Hurst turned about with a small shriek when the cellar door opened. Then dim light picked out Bryce's heavy form, and Temulak still limp in the hunter's arms. Flandry came behind, shedding his cape with a relieved whistle. "Oh," gasped Judith. "You got him!"

Bryce's eyes went around the circle of them. A dozen men stood with taut brown faces in the light of a single small fluoro. Their shadows fell monstrous in the corners and across the window shutters. Knives and forbidden guns gleamed at their belts. Kit was the only person seated, still slumped in the dull sadness of stimulol reaction.

"Damn near didn't," grunted Bryce. "Couldn't have, without the captain here. Sir Dominic, I apologize for some things I'd been thinkin' lately 'bout Terra."

"An' I." Judith Hurst trod forward, taking both the Navy man's hands. She was among the few women in the underground, and Flandry thought it a crime to risk such looks being shot up. She was tall, with long auburn hair and skin like cream; her eyes were sleepy brown in a full, pouting face; her figure strained at shorts and bolero. “I never thought I’d see you again,” she said. “But you’ve come back with the first real success this war’s had for us.”

“Two swallows do not make a drinking bout,” warned Flandry. He gave her his courtliest bow. “Speaking of which, I could use something liquid, and cannot imagine a more ornamental cupbearer. But first, let’s deal with friend Temulak. This way, isn’t it?”

As he passed Kit, her exhausted eyes turned up to him. Slow tears coursed down her face. “Oh, Dominic, you’re alive,” she whispered. “That makes everything else seem like nothin’.” She rose to wobbly legs. He threw her a preoccupied smile and continued on past, his brain choked with technicalities.

Given a proper biopsych lab, he could have learned how to get truth out of Temulak with drugs and electronics. But now he just didn’t have enough data on the species. He would have to fall back on certain widely applicable, if not universal, rules of psychology.

At his orders, an offside room in the cellar had been provided with a comfortable bed. He stripped Temulak and tied him down, firmly, but using soft bonds which wouldn’t chafe. The prisoner began to stir. By the time Flandry was through and Temulak immobile, the gray alien eyes were open and the muzzle wrinkled back over white teeth. A growl rumbled in Temulak’s throat.

“Feeling better?” asked the man unctuously.

“Not as well as I shall when we pull you down in the street.” The Anglic was thickly accented, but fluent, and it bore a haughtiness like steel.

“I shudder.” Flandry kindled a cigarette. “Well, comrade, if you want to answer some questions now, it will save trouble all around. I presume, since you're alive, you've been blanked of your home sun's coordinates. But you retain clues." He blew a thoughtful smoke ring. "And, to be sure, there are the things you obviously do know, since your rank requires it. Oh, all sorts of things, dear heart, which my side is just dying to find out." He chuckled. "I don't mean that literally. Any dying will be done by you."

Temulak stiffened. "If you think I would remain alive, at the price of betraying the *orbekh*—"

"Nothing so clear-cut."

The red fur bristled, but Temulak snarled: "Nor will pain in any degree compel me. And I do not believe you understand the psycho-physiology of my race well enough to undertake total reconditioning."

"No," admitted Flandry, "not yet. However, I haven't time for reconditioning in any event, and torture is so strenuous…besides offering no guarantee that when you talk, you won't fib. No, no, my friend, you'll want to spill to me pretty soon. Whenever you've had enough, just call and I'll come hear you out."

He nodded to Dr. Reineke. The physician wheeled forth the equipment he had abstracted from Garth General Hospital at Flandry's request. A blindfolding hood went over Temulak's eyes, sound-deadening wax filled his ears and plugged his nose, a machine supplied him with intravenous nourishment and another removed body wastes. They left him immobile and, except for the soft constant pressure of bonds and bed, sealed into a darkness like death. No sense impressions could reach him from outside. It was painless, it did no permanent harm, but the mind is not intended for such isolation. When there is nothing by which it may orient itself, it rapidly loses all knowledge of time; an hour seems like a day, and later like a week or a year. Space and material reality vanish. Hallucinations come, and the will begins to crumble. Most particularly is this true when the victim is among enemies, tensed to feel the whip or knife which his own ferocious culture would surely use.

Flandry closed the door. “Keep a guard,” he said. “When he begins to holler, let me know.” He peeled off his tunic. “From whom can I beg something dry to wear?”

Judith gave his torso a long look. “I thought all Terrans were flabby, Sir Dominic,” she purred. “I was wrong about that too.”

His eyes raked her. “And you, my dear, make it abundantly plain that Vixenites are anything but,” he leered.

She took his arm. “What do you plan to do next?”

“Scratch around. Observe. Whip this maquisard outfit into something efficient. There are so many stunts to teach you. To name just one, any time you’ve no other amusement, you can halt work at a war factory for half a day with an anonymous telecall warning that a time bomb’s been planted and the staff had better get out. Then there’s all the rest of your planet to organize. I don’t know how many days I’ll have, but there’s enough work to fill a year of ’em.” Flandry stretched luxuriously, “Right now, though, I want that drink I spoke of.”

“Here you are, sir.” Bryce held out a flask.

Judith flicked a scowl at him. “Is that white mule all you can offer the captain?” she cried. Her hair glowed along her back as she turned to smile again at Flandry. “I know you’ll think I’m terribly forward, but I have two bottles o’ real Bourgogne at my house. ’Tis only a few blocks from here, an’ I know a safe way to go.”

Oh-ho! Flandry licked his mental chops. “Delighted,” he said.

“I’d invite the rest o’ you,” said Judith sweetly, “but ’tisn’t enough to go aroun’, an’ Sir Dominic deserves it the most. Nothin’s too good for him, that’s what I think. Just nothin’ at all.”

“Agreed,” said Flandry. He bowed good night and went out with her.

Kit stared after them a moment. As he closed the door, he heard her burst into weeping.

-11-

Three of Vixen’s 22-hour rotation periods went by, and part of a fourth, before the message came that Temulak had broken. Flandry whistled. “It’s about time! If they’re all as tough as that—”

Judith clung to him. “Do you have to go right now, darlin’?” she murmured. “You’ve been away so much...out prowlin’, spyin’, an’ the streets still full o’ packs huntin’ for whoever attacked that squad—I’m terrified for you.”

Her look was more inviting than anxious. Flandry kissed her absentmindedly. “We’re patriots and all that sort of rot,” he said. “I could not love you so much, dear, *et cetera*. Now do let go.” He was out the door before she could speak further.

The way between her house and the underground’s went mostly from garden to garden, but there was a stretch of public thoroughfare. Flandry put hands in pockets and sauntered along under rustling feather palms as if he had neither cares nor haste. The other humans about, afoot or in groundcars, were subdued, the pinch of hunger and shabbiness already upon them. Once a party of Ardazirho whirred past on motor unicycles; their sharp red muzzles clove the air like prows, and they left a wake of frightened silence behind them. The winter sun burned low to northwest, big and dazzling white in a pale sky, among hurried stormclouds.

When Flandry let himself into the cellar, only Emil Bryce and Kit Kittredge were there. The hunter lounged on guard. From the closed door behind him came howling and sobbing. “He babbled he’d talk,”said Bryce. “But can you trust what he says?”

“Interrogation is a science too,” answered Flandry. “If Temulak is enough like a human to break under isolation, he won’t be able to invent consistent lies fast enough when I start throwing questions at him. Did you get that recorder I wanted?”

“Here.” Kit picked it up. She looked very small and alone in all the shadows. Sleeplessness had reddened her eyes. She brought the machine to Flandry, who met her several meters from Bryce. She leaned toward him on tiptoe and whispered shakily: “What will you do now?”

Flandry studied her. He had gotten to know her well on the journey here, he thought. But that was under just one set of conditions—and how well does one human ever know another, in spite of all pretentious psychology? Since capturing the Ardazirho, he had only seen her on a single brief visit to this cellar. They had had a few moments alone, but nothing very personal was said. There had been no time for it. He saw how she trembled.

“I’m going to quiz brother Temulak,” he told her. “And afterward I could use some dinner and a stiff drink.”

“With Judith Hurst?” It startled him, how ferociously she spat it out.

“Depends,” he said in a careful tone.

“Dominic—” She hugged herself, forlornly, to stop shivering. Her gaze blurred, seeking his. “Don’t. Please don’t make me do…what I don’t want —”

"We'll see." He started toward the inner door. Kit began to cry, hopelessly this time.

Bryce got up. "Why, what all's the matter?" he asked.

"She's overtired." Flandry opened the door.

"Worse'n that." The hunter looked from him to the girl and back again. Resentment smoldered in his growl: "Maybe it's none o' my business—"

"It isn't." Flandry stepped through, closing the door behind him.

Temulak lay shuddering and gasping. Flandry set up the recorder and unplugged the Ardazirho's ears. "Did you want to speak to me?" he asked mildly.

"Let me go!" shrieked Temulak. "Let me go, I say! *Zamara shammish ni ulan!"* He opened his mouth and howled. It was so much like a beast that a crawling went along Flandry's spine.

"We'll see, after you've cooperated." The man sat down.

"I never thought…you gray people…gray hearts—" Temulak whimpered. He dribbled between his fangs.

"Good night, then," said Flandry. "Sweet dreams."

"No! No, let me see! Let me smell! I will…*zamara, zamara—"*

Flandry began to interrogate.

It took time. The basic principle was to keep hitting, snap out a question, yank forth the answer, toss the next question, pounce on the smallest discrepancies, always strike and strike and strike with never a second's pause for the victim to think. Without a partner, Flandry was soon tired. He kept going, on cigarettes and nerves; after the first hour, he lost count of time.

In the end, with a full tape, he relaxed a moment. The air was nearly solid with smoke. Sweat felt sticky under his clothes. He puffed yet another cigarette and noticed impersonally the shakiness of his hand. But Temulak whined and twitched, beaten close to mindlessness by sheer psychic exhaustion.

The picture so far was only a bare outline, thought Flandry in a dull far-off way. How much could be told in one night of an entire world, its greatness and rich variety, its many peoples and all their histories? How much, to this day, do we really know about Terra? But the tape held information worth entire ships.

Somewhere there was a sun, brighter even than Cerulia, and a planet called Ardazir by its principal nation. ("Nation" was the Anglic word; Flandry had an impression that "clan alliance" or "pack aggregate" might more closely translate *orbekh.*) Interplanetary travel had been independently achieved by that country. Then, some fifteen standard years ago, gravities, super-light pseudo-speeds, the whole apparatus of the modern galaxy, had burst upon Ardazir. The war lords (chiefs, speakers, pack leaders?) of Urdahu, the dominant *orbekh,* had promptly used these to complete the subjugation of their own world. Then they turned outward. Their hunters ravened into a dozen backward systems, looting and enslaving; engineers followed, organizing the conquered planets for further war.

And now the attack on the human empire had begun. The lords of Urdahu assured their followers that Ardazir had allies, mighty denizens of worlds so alien that there could never be any fear of attack—though these aliens had long been annoyed by humankind, and found in Ardazir an instrument to destroy and replace the Terran Empire…Temulak had not inquired more deeply, had not thought much about it at all. The Ardazirho seemed, by nature, somewhat more reckless and fatalistic than men, and somewhat less curious. If circumstances had provided a chance for adventure, glory, and wealth, that was enough. Precautions could be left in care of the *orbekh's* wise old females.

Flandry smoked in a thick silence. If Ymir were, indeed, behind Ardazir—it would be natural for Ymir to cooperate temporarily with Merseia, whipsawing Terra between the Syrax and Vixen crises. Maybe Merseia was next on Ymir's list. Thereafter Ardazir would hardly prove troublesome to wreck.

But what grudge could Ymir have against oxygen breathers, or even against Terra alone? There had been some small friction, yes, inevitably—but nothing serious, surely the monsters rubbed each other more raw than…*And yet Horx did his level best to kill me. Why? What could he have been hired with? What material thing from a terrestroid planet would not collapse in his hands on Jupiter? What reason would he have, except orders from his own governor, who was carrying out a policy hatched on Ymir itself…?*

Flandry clenched a fist. There was an answer to that question, but not one he dared rely on without further proof. He bent his mind back toward practicalities. Mostly the tape held such details: the number of Ardazirho ships and troops in this system, recognition signals, military dispositions across Vixen, the layout of forts and especially of the great headquarters den; the total population of Ardazir, resources, industry, army and navy… Temulak was not in on many state secrets, but he had enough indications to give Flandry gooseflesh. Two million or so warriors occupied Vixen; a hundred million were still at home or on the already conquered planets, where war materiel was being rapidly stockpiled; officers had all been informed that there were plenty of other vulnerable Imperial outposts, human colonies or the home worlds of Terran-allied species…Yes, Ardazir was surely planning to strike elsewhere within the Empire, and soon. Another one or two such blows, and the Imperial Navy *must* surrender Syrax to Merseia, turn inward and defend the mother planet. At which point—

Not true that an army marches on its stomach, thought Flandry. *It needs information even more than food. Marches on its head. Which, no doubt, is why the Imperial High Command has so many flat-heads.*

He chuckled. Bad as it was, the joke strengthened him. And he was going to need strength.

"Will you let me see?" asked Temulak in a small, broken voice.

"I will deprive you no longer of my beauty," said Flandry. He unhooded the rufous head and drew his wax plugs from the nose. Temulak blinked dazedly into smoke and one dull light. Flandry uncoupled the machines which had kept him alive. "You'll remain our guest, of course," he said. "If it turns out you prevaricated, back you go in the dark closet."

Temulak bristled. His teeth snapped together, missing the man's arm by a centimeter.

"Naughty!" Flandry stepped back. "For that, you can stay tied up a while."

Temulak snarled from the cot: "You gray-skinned hairless worm, if you think your *valkuza's* tricks will save you from the Black People—I myself will rip out your gullet and strangle you with your own bowels!"

"And foreclose my mortgage," said Flandry. He went out, closing the door behind him.

Bryce and Kit started. They had fallen asleep in their chairs. The hunter rubbed his eyes. "God o' the galaxy, you been at it a long time!" he exclaimed.

“Here.” Flandry tossed him the tape spool. “This has to reach Admiral Walton’s fleet It’s necessary, if not quite sufficient, for your liberation. Can do?”

“The enemy would pick up radio,” said Bryce doubtfully. “We still got a few spaceships hid, but Kit’s was the fastest. An’ since then, too, the wolf space guard’s been tightened till it creaks.”

Flandry sighed. “I was afraid of that.” He scribbled on a sheet of paper. “Here’s a rough map to show you where my personal flitter is. D’you know this tune?” He whistled. “No? That proves you’ve a clean mind. Well, learn it.” He rehearsed the Vixenite till he was satisfied. “Good. Approach the flitter whistling that, and Chives won’t shoot you without investigation. Give him this note. It says for him to take the tape to Walton. If anything can run that blockade without collecting a missile, it’s Chives in the *Hooligan*.”

Kit suppressed a gasp. “But then you, Dominic—no escape—”

Flandry shrugged. “I’m much too tired to care about aught except a nice soft bed.”

Bryce, sticking the spool under his tunic, grinned: “Whose?”

Kit stood as if struck.

Flandry nodded slightly at her. “That’s the way of it.” He glanced at his chrono. “Close to local midnight Shove off, Bryce, lad. But stop by and tell Dr. Reineke to shift his apparatus and the prisoner elsewhere. It’s always best to keep moving around, when you’re being searched for. And nobody, except the pill peddler and whoever helps him, is to know where they stash Temulak next. All clear?”

“Dominic—” Kit closed her fists till the knuckles stood white. She stared down at the floor; he could only see her short bright hair.

He said gently: "I have to sleep or collapse, lass. I'll meet you at noon by the Rocket Fountain. I think we've a few private things to discuss."

She turned and fled upstairs.

Flandry departed too. The night sky was aflicker with aurora; he thought he could hear its ionic hiss in the city's blacked-out silence. Once he scrambled to a rooftop and waited for an Ardazirho patrol to go by. Wan blue light glimmered off their metal and their teeth.

Judith made him welcome. "I've been so worried, darlin'—"

He considered her a while. Weariness dragged at him. But she had put out a late supper, with wine and a cold game bird, as she knew he liked it; and her hair glowed red by candlelight. Sleep be damned, Flandry decided. He might be permanently asleep tomorrow.

He did nap for a few morning hours, and went out before noon. Explorers' Plaza had been a gay scene once, where folk sat leisurely in the surrounding gardens, sipping coffee and listening to harp trees in the wind and watching life stream past. Now it was empty. The metal fountain itself, in the form of an ancient space rocket, still jetted many-colored heatless fires from its tail; but they seemed pale under the gloomy winter sky.

Flandry took out a cigarette, sat down on the fountain rim and waited. A few preliminary raindrops kissed his half lifted face.

A military truck careened out of a deserted street and ground to a halt. Three Ardazirho leaped from the cab. Kit was with them. She pointed at Flandry. Lightning blinked immediately overhead, and sudden thunder swamped her words. But the tone was vindictive.

"Halt, human!"

It must have been the only Anglic phrase any of the three invaders knew. They bayed it again and yet again as Flandry sprang to the plaza. He ducked and began to run, zigzagging.

No shots were fired. An Ardazirho yelped glee and opened the truck body. Wings snapped leathery. Flandry threw a glance behind. A score of meter-long snake bodies were streaming upward from the truck. They saw him, whistled and stooped.

Flandry ran. His heart began to pump, the wildness of irrational uncontrollable terror. The batsnakes reached him. He heard teeth click together behind his nape. A lean body coiled on his right arm. He jerked the limb up, frantic. Wings resisted him. Fangs needled into his flesh. The rest of the pack whirled and dove and whipped him with their tails.

He started to run again. The three Ardazirho followed, long bounds which took them over the ground faster than a man could speed. They howled, and there was laughter in their howling. The street was empty, resounding under boots. Shuttered windows looked down without seeing. Doors were closed and locked.

Flandry stopped. He spun around. His right arm was still cumbered. The left dove beneath his tunic. His needier came out. He aimed at the nearest of the laughing ruddy devils. A batsnake threw itself on his gun hand. It bit with trained precision, into the fingers. Flandry let the weapon fall. He snatched after the snake—to wring just one of their damned necks—!

It writhed free. Its reptile-like jaws grinned at him. Then the Ardazirho closed in.

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ost of the year, Vixen's northern half was simply desert, swamp, or prairie, where a quick vegetative life sprang up and animals that had been estivating crept from their burrows. The arctic even knew snow, when

M winter-long night had fallen. But in summer the snows melted to wild rivers, the rivers overflowed and became lakes, the lakes baked dry. Storms raged about the equator and into the southern hemisphere, as water precipitated again in cooler parts. Except for small seas dreary amidst salt flats, the north blistered arid. Fires broke loose, the pampas became barren again in a few red days. Under such erosive conditions, this land had no mountains. Most of it was plain, where dust and ash scoured on a furnace wind. In some places rose gnarled ranges, lifeless hills, twisted crags, arroyos carved by flash floods into huge earth scars.

The Ardazirho had established their headquarters in such a region, a little below the arctic circle. Thousands of lethal kilometers made it safe from human ground attack; the broken country was camouflage and protection from spaceships. Not that they tried to conceal their fortress absolutely. That would have been impossible. But it burrowed deep into the range and offered few specific targets.

Here and there Flandry saw a warship sitting insolently in the open, a missile emplacement, a detector station, a lookout tower black and lean against the blinding sky. Outer walls twisted through gullies and over naked ridges; Ardazirho sentries paced them, untroubled by dry cruel heat, blue-white hell-glare, pouring ultraviolet radiation. But mostly, the fortress went inside the hills, long vaulted tunnels where boots clashed and voices echoed from room to den-like room. Construction had followed standard dig-in methods: prodigal use of atomic energy to fuse the living rock into desired patterns, then swift robotic installation of the necessary mechanisms. But the layout was rougher, more tortuous, less private, than man or Merseian would have liked. The ancestral Ardazirho had laired in caves and hunted in packs.

Flandry was hustled into a small room equipped as a laboratory. A pair of warriors clamped him in place. A grizzled technician began to prepare instruments.

Often, in the next day or two, Flandry screamed. He couldn't help it. Electronic learning should not go that fast. But finally, sick and shaking, he could growl the Urdahu language. Indeed, he thought, the Ardazirho had been thoroughly briefed. They understood the human nervous system so well that they could stamp a new linguistic pattern on it in mere hours, and not drive the owner insane.

Not quite.

Flandry was led down endless booming halls. Their brilliant bluish fluorescence hurt his eyes, forcing him to squint. Even so, he watched what passed. It might be a truckload of ammunition, driven at crazy speed by a warrior who yelped curses at foot traffic. Or it might be a roomful of naked red-furred shapes: sprawled in snarling, quarrelsome fellowship; gambling with tetrahedral dice for stakes up to a year's slavery; watching a wrestling match which employed teeth and nails; testing nerve by standing up in turn against a wall while the rest threw axes. Or it might be a sort of chapel, where a single scarred fighter wallowed in pungent leaves before a great burning wheel. Or it might be a mess hall and a troop lying on fur rugs, bolting raw meat and howling in chorus with one who danced on a monstrous drumhead.

The man came at last to an office. This was also an artificial cave, thick straw on the floor, gloom in the corners, a thin stream of water running down a groove in one wall. A big Ardazirho lay prone on a hairy dais, lifted on both elbows to a slanting desktop. He wore only a skirt of leather strips, a crooked knife and a very modern blaster. But the telescreen and intercom before him were also new, and Flandry's guards touched their black noses in his presence.

"Go," he said in the Urdahu. "Wait outside." The guards obeyed. He nodded at Flandry. "Be seated, if you wish."

The human lowered himself. He was still weak from what he had undergone, filthy, ill-fed, and ragged. Automatically he smoothed back his hair, and thanked human laziness for its invention of long-lasting antibeard enzyme. He needed such morale factors.

His aching muscles grew tight. Things were in motion again.

"I am Svantozik of the Janneer Ya," said the rough voice. "I am told that you are Captain Dominic Flandry of Terran Naval Intelligence. You may consider my status approximately the same."

"As one colleague to another," husked Flandry, "will you give me a drink?"

"By all means." Svantozik gestured to the artesian stream.

Flandry threw him a reproachful look, but needed other things too badly to elaborate. "It would be a kindly deed, and one meriting my gratitude, if you provided me at once with dark lenses and cigarettes." The last word was perforce Anglic. He managed a grin. "Later I will tell you what further courtesies ought to be customary."

Svantozik barked laughter. "I expected your eyes would suffer," he said. "Here." He reached in the desk and tossed over a pair of green polarite goggles, doubtless taken off a Vixenite casualty. Flandry put them on and whistled relief. "Tobacco is forbidden," added Svantozik. "Only a species with half-dead scent organs could endure it."

"Oh, well. There was no harm in asking." Flandry hugged his knees and leaned back against the cave wall.

“None. Now, I wish to congratulate you on your daring exploits.” Svantozik’s smile looked alarming enough, but it seemed friendly. “We searched for your vessel, but it must have escaped the planet.”

“Thanks,” said Flandry, quite sincerely. “I was afraid you would have gotten there in time to blast it.” He cocked his head. “In return…see here, my friend [literally: croucher-in-my-blind], when dealing with my species, it is usually better to discourage them. You should have claimed you had caught my boat before it could escape, manufacturing false evidence if necessary to convince me. That would make me much more liable to yield my will to yours.”

“Oh, indeed?” Svantozik pricked up his ears. “Now among the Black People, the effect would be just opposite. Good news tends to relax us, make us grateful and amenable to its bearer. Bad tidings raise the quotient of defiance.”

“Well, of course it is not that simple,” said Flandry. “In breaking down the resistance of a man, the commonest technique is to chivvy him for a protracted time, and then halt the process, speak kindly to him—preferably, get someone else to do that.”

“Ah.” Svantozik drooped lids over his cold eyes. “Are you not being unwise in telling me this—if it is true?”

“It is textbook truth,” said Flandry, “as I am sure whatever race has instructed you in the facts about Terra’s Empire will confirm. I am revealing no secret. But as you must be aware, textbooks have little value in practical matters. There is always the subtlety of the individual, which eludes anything except direct intuition based on wide, intimate experience. And you, being nonhuman, cannot ever have such an experience of men.”

“True.” The long head nodded. “In fact, I remember now reading somewhat of the human trait you mention…but there was so much else to learn, prior to the Great Hunt we are now on, that it had slipped my memory. So you tantalize me with a fact I could use—if I were on your side!” A sudden deep chuckle cracked in the ruffed throat. “I like you, Captain, the Sky Cave eat me if I do not.”

Flandry smiled back. “We could have fun. But what are your intentions toward me now?”

“To learn what I can. For example, whether or not you were concerned in the murder of four warriors in Garth and the abduction of a fifth, not long ago. The informant who led us to you has used hysterics—real or simulated—to escape detailed questioning so far. Since the captured Ardazirho was a Clan-master, and therefore possessed of valuable information, I suspect you had a hand in this.”

“I swear upon the Golden Ass of Apuleius I did not.”

“What is that?”

“One of our most revered books.”

“The Powers only hunt at night,” quoted Svantozik. “In other words, oaths are cheap. I personally do not wish to hurt you unduly, being skeptical of the value of torture anyhow. And I know that officers like you are immunized to the so-called truth sera. Therefore, reconditioning would be necessary: a long, tedious process, the answers stale when finally you wanted to give them, and you of little further value to us or yourself.” He shrugged. “But I am going back to Ardazir before long, to report and wait reassignment. I know who will succeed me here: an officer quite anxious to practice some of the techniques which we have been told are effective on Terrans. I recommend you cooperate with me instead.”

This must be one of their crack field operatives, thought Flandry, growing cold. *He did the basic Intelligence work on Vixen. Now, with Vixen in hand, he'll be sent to do the same job when the next Terran planet is attacked. Which will be soon!*

Flandry slumped. "Very well," he said in a dull tone. "I captured Temulak."

"Ha!" Svantozik crouched all-fours on the dais. The fur stood up along his spine, the iron-colored eyes burned. "Where is he now?"

"I do not know. As a precaution, I had him moved elsewhere, and did not inquire the place."

"Wise." Svantozik relaxed. "What did you get from him?"

"Nothing. He did not crack."

Svantozik stared at Flandry. "I doubt that," he said. "Not that I scorn Temulak—a brave one—but you are an extraordinary specimen of a civilization older and more learned than mine. It would be strange if you had not—"

Flandry sat up straight. His laughter barked harsh. "Extraordinary?" he cried bitterly. "I suppose so...the way I allowed myself to be caught like a cub!"

"'No ground is free of possible pits,'" murmured Svantozik. He brooded a while. Presently: "Why did the female betray you? She went to our headquarters, declared you were a Terran agent, and led our warriors to your meeting place. What had she to gain?"

"I don't know," groaned Flandry. "What difference does it make? She is wholly yours now, you know. The very fact she aided you once gives you the power to make her do it again—lest you denounce her to her own people." Svantozik nodded, grinning. "What do her original motives matter?" The man sagged back and picked at the straw.

"I am interested," said Svantozik. "Perhaps the same process may work again, on other humans."

"No." Flandry shook his head in a stunned way. "This was personal. I suppose she thought I had betrayed her first—Why am I telling you this?"

"I have been informed that you Terrans often have strong feelings about individuals of the opposite sex," said Svantozik. "I was told it will occasionally drive you to desperate, meaningless acts."

Flandry passed a tired hand across his brow. "Forget it," he mumbled. "Just be kind to her. You can do that much, can you not?"

"As a matter of fact—" Svantozik broke off. He sat for a moment, staring at emptiness.

"Great unborn planets!" he whispered.

"What?" Flandry didn't look up.

"No matter," said Svantozik hastily. "Ah, am I right in assuming there was a reciprocal affection on your part?"

"It is no concern of yours!" Flandry sat up and shouted it. "I will hear no more! Say what else you will, but keep your filthy snout out of my own life!"

"So," breathed Svantozik. "Yes-s-s-s...Well, then, let us discuss other things."

He hammered at Flandry a while, not with quite the ruthlessness the human had shown Temulak. Indeed, he revealed a kind of chivalry: there was respect, fellow feeling, even an acrid liking in him for this man whose soul he hunted. Once or twice Flandry managed to divert the conversation

—they spoke briefly of alcoholic drinks and riding animals; they traded some improper jokes, similar in both cultures.

Nevertheless, Svantozik hunted. It was a rough few hours.

At last Flandry was taken away. He was too worn to notice very much, but the route did seem devious. He was finally pushed into a room, not unlike Svantozik's office, save that it had human-type furniture and illumination. The door clashed behind him.

Kit stood waiting.

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For a moment he thought she would scream. Then, very quickly, her eyes closed. She opened them again. They remained dry, as if all her tears had been spent. She took a step toward him.

"Oh, God, Kit," he croaked.

Her arms closed about his neck. He held her to him. His own gaze flickered around the room, until it found a small human-made box with a few controls which he recognized. He nodded to himself, ever so faintly, and drew an uneven breath. But he was still uncertain.

"Dominic, darlin'—" Kit's mouth sought his.

He stumbled to the bunk, sat down and covered his face. "Don't," he whispered. "I can't take much more."

The girl sat down beside him. She laid her head on his shoulder. He felt how she trembled. But the words came in glorious anticlimax: "That debuggin' unit is perfectly good, Dominic."

He wanted to lean back and shout with sudden uproarious mirth. He wanted to kick his heels and thumb his nose and turn handsprings across the cell. But he held himself in, letting only a rip of laughter come from lips which he hid against her cheek.

He had more than half expected Svantozik to provide a bugscrambler. Only with the sure knowledge that any listening devices were being negated by electronic and sound-wave interference, would even a cadet of Intelligence relax and speak freely. He suspected, though, that a hidden lens was conveying a silent image. They could talk, but both of them must continue to pantomime.

"How's it been, Kit?" he asked. "Rough?"

She nodded, not play-acting her misery at all. "But I haven't had to give any names," she gulped. "Not yet."

"Let's hope you don't," said Flandry.

He had told her in the hurricane cellar—how many centuries ago?…"This is picayune stuff. I'm not doing what any competent undercover agent couldn't: what a score of Walton's men will be trying as soon as they can be smuggled here. I've something crazier in mind. Quite likely it'll kill us, but then again it might strike a blow worth whole fleets. Are you game, kid? It means the risk of death, or torture, or lifelong slavery on a foreign planet. What you'll find worst, though, is the risk of having to sell out your own comrades, name them to the enemy, so he will keep confidence in you. Are you brave enough to sacrifice twenty lives for a world? I believe you are—but it's as cruel a thing as I could ask of any living creature."

"They brought me straight here," said Kit, holding him. "I don't think they know quite what to make o' me. A few minutes ago, one o' them came hotfootin' here with the scrambler an' orders for me to treat you…" a slow flush went over her face, "…kindly. To get information from you, if I could, by any means that seemed usable."

Flandry waved a fist in melodramatic despair, while out of a contorted face his tone came levelly: "I expected something like this. I led Svantozik, the local snooper-in-chief, to think that gentle treatment from one of my own species, after a hard grilling from him, might break me down. Especially if you were the one in question. Svantozik isn't stupid at all, but he's dealing with an alien race, us, whose psychology he knows mainly from sketchy second-hand accounts. I've an advantage: the Ardazirho are new to me, but I've spent a lifetime dealing with all shapes and sizes of other species. Already I see what the Ardazirho have in common with several peoples whom I hornswoggled in the past."

The girl bit her lip to hold it steady. She looked around the stone-walled room, and he knew she thought of kilometers of tunnel, ramparts and guns, wolfish hunters, and the desert beyond where men could not live. Her words fell thin and frightened: "What are we goin' to do now, Dominic? You never told me what you planned."

"Because I didn't know," he replied. "Once here, I'd have to play by ear. Fortunately, my confidence in my own ability to land on my feet approaches pure conceit, or would if I had any faults. We're not doing badly, Kit. I've learned their principal language, and you've been smuggled into their ranks."

"They don't trust me yet."

"No. I didn't expect they would—very much...But let's carry on our visual performance. I wouldn't flip-flop over to the enemy side just because you're here, Kit; but when I am badly shaken, I lose discretion and ordinary carefulness. Svantozik will accept that."

He gathered her back to him. She responded hungrily. He felt so much of himself return to his abused being, that his brain began to spark, throwing up schemes and inspecting them, discarding them and generating new ones, like a pyrotechnic display, like merry hell.

He said at last, while she quivered on his lap: “I think I have a notion. We’ll have to play things as they lie, and prearrange a few signals, but here’s what we’ll try for.” He felt her stiffen in his embrace. “Why, what’s the matter?”

She asked, low and bitter: “Were you thinkin’ o’ your work all the time—just now?”

“Not that alone.” He permitted himself the briefest grin. “Or, rather, I enjoyed my work immensely.”

“But still—Oh, nevermind. Go on.” She slumped.

Flandry scowled. But he dared not stop for side issues. He said: “Tell Svantozik, or whoever deals with you, that you played remorseful in my presence, but actually you hate my inwards, and my outwards too, because —uh—”

“Judith!” she snarled.

He had the grace to blush. “I suppose that’s as plausible a reason as any, at least in Ardazirho eyes.”

“Or human. If you knew how close I was to—No. Go on.”

“Well, tell the enemy that you told me you’d betrayed me in a fit of pique, and now you regretted it. And I, being wildly in love with you—which again is highly believable—” She gave his predictable gallantry no response whatsoever. “I told you there was a possible escape for you. I said this: The Ardazirho are under the impression that Ymir is behind them. Actually, Ymir leans toward Terra, since we are more peace-minded and therefore less trouble-some. The Ymirites are willing to help us in small ways; we keep this fact secret because now and then it saves us in emergencies. If I could only set a spaceship's signal to a certain recognition pattern, you could try to steal that ship. The Ardazirho would assume you headed for Walton's fleet, and line out after you in that direction. So you could give them the slip, reach Ogre, transmit the signal pattern, and request transportation to safety in a force-bubble ship."

Her eyes stretched wide with terror. "But if Svantozik hears that—an' 'tisn't true—"

"He won't know it's false till he's tried, will he?" answered Flandry cheerfully. "If I lied, it isn't your fault. In fact, since you hastened to tattle, even about what looked like an escape for you, it'll convince him you're a firm collaborationist."

"But—no, Dominic. 'Tis…I don't dare—"

"Don't hand me that, Kit. You're one girl in ten to the tenth, and there's nothing you won't dare."

Then she did begin to sob.

After she had gone, Flandry spent a much less happy time waiting. He could still only guess how his enemy would react: an experienced human would probably not be deceived, and Svantozik's ignorance of human psychology might not be as deep as hoped. Flandry swore and tried to rest. The weariness of the past days was gray upon him.

When his cell door opened, he sprang up with a jerkiness that told him how thin his nerves were worn.

Svantozik stood there, four guards poised behind. The Ardazirho officer flashed teeth in a grin. "Good hunting, Captain," he greeted. "Is your den comfortable?"

"It will do," said Flandry, "until I can get one provided with a box of cigars, a bottle of whisky, and a female."

“The female, at least, I tried to furnish,” riposted Svantozik.

Flandry added in his suavest tone: “Oh, yes, I should also like a rug of Ardazirho skin.”

One of the guards snarled. Svantozik chuckled. “I too have a favor to ask, Captain,” he said. “My brothers in the engineering division are interested in modifying a few spaceships to make them more readily usable by humans. You understand how such differences as the location of the thumb, or that lumbar conformation which makes it more comfortable for us to lie prone on the elbows than sit, have influenced the design of our control panels. A man would have trouble steering an Ardazirho craft. Yet necessarily, in the course of time, if the Great Hunt succeeds and we acquire human subjects—we will find occasion for some of them to pilot some of our vehicles. The Kittredge female, for example, could profitably have a ship of her own, since we anticipate usefulness in her as a go-between among us and the human colonists here. If you would help her—simply in checking over one of our craft, and drawing up suggestions—”

Flandry grew rigid. “Why should I help you at all?” he said through clenched jaws.

Svantozik shrugged. “It is very minor assistance. We could do it ourselves. But it may pass the time for you.” Wickedly: “I am not at all sure that good treatment, rather than abuse, may not be the way to break down a man. Also, Captain, if you must have a rationalization, think: here is a chance to examine one of our vessels close up. If later, somehow, you escape, your own service would be interested in what you saw.”

Flandry stood a moment, altogether quiet. Thought lanced through him: *Kit told. Svantozik naturally prefers me not to know what she did tell. So he* *makes up this story—offers me what he hopes I'll think is a God-sent opportunity to arrange for Kit's escape—*

He said aloud, urbanely: "You are most kind, my friend of the Janneer Ya. But Miss Kittredge and I could not feel at ease with ugly guards like yours drooling over our shoulders."

He got growls from two warriors that time. Svantozik hushed them. "That is easily arranged," he said. "The guards can stay out of the control turret."

"Excellent. Then, if you have some human-made tools—"

They went down hollow corridors, past emplacements where artillery slept like nested dinosaurs, across the furious arctic day, and so to a spaceship near the outworks. Through goggles, the man studied her fiercely gleaming shape. About equivalent to a Terran Comet class. Fast, lightly armed, a normal complement of fifteen or so, but one could handle her if need be.

The naked hills beyond wavered in heat. When he had stepped through the airlock, he felt dizzy from that brief exposure.

Svantozik stopped at the turret companionway. "Proceed," he invited cordially. "My warriors will wait here until you wish to return—at which time you and the female will come dine with me and I shall provide Terran delicacies." Mirth crossed his eyes. "Of course, the engines have been temporarily disconnected."

"Of course," bowed Flandry.

Kit met him as he shut the turret door. Her fingers closed cold on his arm. "Now what'll we do?" she gasped.

"Easy, lass." He disengaged her. "I don't see a bugscrambler here." *Remember, Svantozik thinks I think you are still loyal to me. Play it, Kit,* *don't forget, or we're both done!* "There are four surly-looking guards slouched below," he said. "I don't imagine Svantozik will waste his own valuable time in their company. A direct bug to the office of someone who knows Anglic is more efficient. Consider me making obscene gestures at you, O great unseen audience. But is anyone else aboard, d'you know?"

"N-no—" Her eyes asked him, through fear: *Have you forgotten? Are you alerting them to your plan?*

Flandry wandered past the navigation table to the main radio transceiver. "I don't want to risk someone getting officious," he murmured. "You see, I'd first like to peek at their communication system. It's the easiest thing to modify, if any alterations are needed. And it could look bad, unseen audience, if we were surprised at what is really a harmless inspection." *I trust,* he thought with a devil's inward laughter, *that they don't know I know they know I'm actually supposed to install a password circuit for Kit.*

It was the sort of web he loved. But he remembered, as a cold tautening, that a bullet was still the ultimate simplicity which clove all webs.

He took the cover off and began probing. He could not simply have given Kit the frequencies and wave shapes in a recognition signal: because Ardazirho equipment would not be built just like Terran, nor calibrated in metric units. He must examine an actual set, dismantle parts, test them with oscilloscope and static meters—and, surreptitiously, modify it so that the required pattern would be emitted when a single hidden circuit was closed.

She watched him, as she should if she expected him to believe this was her means of escape. And doubtless the Ardazirho spy watched too, over a bug-screen. When Flandry's job was done, it would be Svantozik who took this ship to Ogre, generated the signal, and saw what happened.

Because the question of whose side the Ymirite Dispersal truly was on, overrode everything else. If Flandry had spoken truth to Kit, the lords of Urdahu must be told without an instants pause.

The man proceeded, making up a pattern as he went and thinking wistfully how nice it would be if Ymir really did favor Terra. Half an hour later he resealed the unit. Then he spent another hour ostentatiously strolling around the turret examining all controls.

"Well," he said at last, "we might as well go home, Kit."

He saw the color leave her face. She knew what that sentence meant. But she nodded. "Let's," she whispered.

Flandry bowed her through the door. As she came down the companionway, the guards at its base got up. Their weapons aimed past her, covering Flandry, who strolled with a tigerish leisure.

Kit pushed through the line of guards. Flandry, still on the companionway, snatched at his pocket. The four guns leaped to focus on him. He laughed and raised empty hands. "I only wanted to scratch an itch," he called.

Kit slipped a knife from the harness of one guard and stabbed him in the ribs.

Flandry dove into the air. A bolt crashed past him, scorching his tunic. He struck the deck with flexed knees and bounced. Kit had already snatched the rifle from the yelling warrior she had wounded. It thundered in her hands, point-blank. Another Ardazirho dropped. Flandry knocked aside the gun of a third. The fourth enemy had whipped around toward Kit. His back was to Flandry. The man raised the blade of his hand and brought it down again, chop to the skull-base. He heard neckbones splinter. The third guard sprang back, seeking room to shoot. Kit blasted him open. The first one, stabbed, on his knees, reached for a dropped rifle. Flandry kicked him in the larynx.

"Starboard lifeboat!" he rasped.

He clattered back into the turret. If the Ardazirho watcher had left the bugscreen by now, he had a few minutes' grace. Otherwise, a nuclear shell would probably write his private doomsday. He snatched up the navigator's manual and sprang out again.

Kit was already in the lifeboat. Its small engine purred, warming up. Flandry plunged through the lock, dogged it behind him. "I'll fly," he panted. "I'm more used to non-Terran panels. You see if you can find some bailing-out equipment. We'll need it."

Where the devil was the release switch? The bugwatcher had evidently quit in time, but any moment now he would start to wonder why Flandry and Party weren't yet out of the spaceship—

There! He slapped down a lever. A hull panel opened. Harsh sunlight poured through the boat's viewscreen. Flandry glanced over its controls. Basically like those he had just studied. He touched the *Escape* button. The engine yelled. The boat sprang from its mother ship, into the sky.

Flandry aimed southward. He saw the fortress whirl dizzily away, fall below the horizon. And still no pursuit, not even a homing missile. They must be too dumbfounded. It wouldn't last, of course...He threw back his head and howled out all his bottled-up laughter, great gusts of it to fill the cabin and echo over the scream of split atmosphere.

"What are you doin'?" Kit's voice came faint and frantic. "We can't escape this way. Head spaceward before they overhaul us!"

Flandry wiped his eyes. “Excuse me,” he said. “I was laughing while I could.” Soberly: “With the blockade, and a slow vessel never designed for human steering, we’d not climb 10,000 kilometers before they nailed us. What we’re going to do is bail out and let the boat continue on automatic. With luck, they’ll pursue it so far before catching up that they’ll have no prayer of backtracking us. With still more luck, they’ll blow the boat up and assume we were destroyed too.”

“Bail out?” Kit looked down at a land of stones and blowing ash. The sky above was like molten steel. “Into that?” she whispered.

“If they do realize we jumped,” said Flandry, “I trust they’ll figure we perished in the desert. A natural conclusion, I’m sure, since our legs aren’t so articulated that we can wear Ardazirho spacesuits.” He grew grimmer than she had known him before. “I’ve had to improvise all along the way. Quite probably I’ve made mistakes, Kit, which will cost us a painful death. But if so, I’m hoping we won’t die for naught.”

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Even riding a grav repulsor down, Flandry felt how the air smote him with heat. When he struck the ground and rolled over, it burned his skin.

He climbed up, already ill. Through his goggles, he saw Kit rise. Dust veiled her, blown on a furnace wind. The desert reached in withered soil and bony crags for a few kilometers beyond her, then the heat-haze swallowed vision. The northern horizon seemed incandescent, impossible to look at.

Thunder banged in the wake of the abandoned lifeboat. Flandry stumbled toward the girl. She leaned on him. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I think I twisted an ankle."

"And scorched it, too, I see. Come on lass, not far now."

They groped over tumbled gray boulders. The weather monitor tower rippled before their eyes, like a skeleton seen through water. The wind blasted and whined. Flandry felt his skin prickle with ultraviolet and bake dry as he walked. The heat began to penetrate his bootsoles.

They were almost at the station when a whistle cut through the air. Flandry lifted aching eyes. Four torpedo shapes went overhead, slashing from horizon to horizon in seconds. The Ardazirho, in pursuit of an empty life-boat. If they had seen the humans below—No. They were gone. Flandry tried to grin, but it split his lips too hurtfully.

The station's equipment huddled in a concrete shack beneath the radio transmitter tower. The shade, when they had staggered through the door, was like all hopes of heaven. Flandry uncorked a water bottle. That was all he had dared take out of the spaceboat supplies; alien food was liable to have incompatible proteins. His throat was too much like a mummy's to talk, but he offered Kit the flask and she gulped thirstily. When he had also swigged, he felt a little better.

"Get to work, wench," he said. "Isn't it lucky you're in Vixen's weather engineering department, so you knew where to find a station and what to do when we got there?"

"Go on," she tried to laugh. It was a rattling in her mouth. "You built your idea aroun' the fact. Let's see, now, they keep tools in a locker at every unit —" She stopped. The shadow in this hut was so deep, against the fury seen through one little window, that she was almost invisible to him. "I can tinker with the sender, easily enough," she said. Slow terror rose in her voice. "Sure, I can make it 'cast your message, 'stead o' telemeterin' weather data. But…I just now get to thinkin'…s'pose an Ardazirho reads it? Or s'pose nobody does? I don't know if my service is even bein' manned now. We could wait here, an' wait, an'—"

"Easy." Flandry came behind her, laid his hands on her shoulders and squeezed. "Anything's possible. But I think the chances favor us. The Ardazirho can hardly spare personnel for something so routine and, to them, unimportant, as weather adjustment. At the same time, the human engineers are very probably still on the job. Humanity always continues as much in the old patterns as possible, people report to their usual work, hell may open but the city will keep every lawn mowed…Our real gamble is that whoever spots our call will have the brains, and the courage and loyalty, to act on it."

She leaned against him a moment. "An' d'you think there's a way for us to be gotten out o' here, under the enemy's nose?"

An obscure pain twinged in his soul. "I know it's unfair, Kit," he said. "I myself am a hardened sinner and this is my job and so on, but it isn't right to hazard all the fun and love and accomplishment waiting for you. It must be done, though. My biggest hope was always to steal a navigation manual. Don't you understand, it will tell us where Ardazir lies!"

"I know." Her sigh was a small sound almost lost in the boom of dry hot wind beyond the door. "We'd better start work."

While she opened the transmitter and cut out the meter circuits, Flandry recorded a message: a simple plea to contact Emil Bryce and arrange the rescue from Station 938 of two humans with vital material for Admiral Walton. How that was to be done, he had no clear idea himself. A Vixenite aircraft would have little chance of getting this far north undetected and undestroyed. A radio message—no, too easily intercepted, unless you had very special apparatus—a courier to the fleet—and if that was lost, another and another—

When she had finished, Kit reached for the second water bottle. “Better not,” said Flandry. “We’ve a long wait.”

“I’m dehydrated,” she husked.

“Me too. But we’ve no salt; heat stroke is a real threat. Drinking as little as possible will stretch our survival time. Why the devil aren’t these places air conditioned and stocked with rations?”

“No need for it. They just get routine inspection…at mid-winter in these parts.” Kit sat down on the one little bench. Flandry joined her. She leaned into the curve of his arm. A savage gust trembled in the hut walls, the window was briefly blackened with flying grit.

“Is Ardazir like this?” she wondered. “Then ’tis a real hell for those devils to come from.”

“Oh, no,” answered Flandry. “Temulak said their planet has a sane orbit. Doubtless it’s warmer than Terra, on the average, but we could stand the temperature in most of its climatic zones, I’m sure. A hot star, emitting strongly in the UV, would split water molecules and kick the free hydrogen into space before it could recombine. The ozone layer would give some protection to the hydrosphere, but not quite enough. So Ardazir must be a good deal drier than Terra, with seas rather than oceans. At the same time, judging from the muscular strength of the natives, as well as the fact they don’t mind Vixen’s air pressure, Ardazir must be somewhat bigger. Surface gravity of one-point-five, maybe. That would retain an atmosphere similar to ours, in spite of the sun.”

He paused. Then: “They aren’t fiends, Kit. They’re fighters and hunters. Possibly they’ve a little less built-in kindliness than our species. But I’m not even sure about that. We were a rambunctious lot too, a few centuries ago. We may well be again, when the Long Night has come and it's root, hog, or die. As a matter of fact, the Ardazirho aren't even one people. They're a whole planetful of races and cultures. The Urdahu conquered the rest only a few years ago. That's why you see all those different clothes on them—concession to parochialism, like an ancient Highland regiment. And I'll give odds that in spite of all their successes, the Urdahu are not too well liked at home. Theirs is a very new empire, imposed by overwhelming force; it could be split again, if we used the right tools. I feel almost sorry for them, Kit. They're the dupes of someone else—and Lord, what a someone that is! What a genius!"

He stopped, because the relentless waterless heat had shriveled his gullet. The girl said, low and bitter: "Go on. Sympathize with Ardazir an' admire the artistry o' this X who's behind it all. You're a professional too. But my kind o' people has to do the dyin'."

"I'm sorry." He ruffled her hair.

"You still haven't tol' me whether you think we'll be rescued alive."

"I don't know." He tensed himself until he could add: "I doubt it. I expect it'll take days, and we can only hold out for hours. But if the ship comes—no, damn it, *when* the ship comes!—that pilot book will be here."

"Thanks for bein' honest, Dominic," she said. "Thanks for everything."

He kissed her, with enormous gentleness.

After that they waited.

The sun sank. A short night fell. It brought little relief, the wind still scourging, the northern sky still aflame. Kit tossed in a feverish daze beside Flandry. He himself could no longer think very clearly. He had hazed recollections of another white night in high-latitude summer—but that had been on Terra, on a cool upland meadow of Norway, and there had been another blonde girl beside him—her lips were like roses…

The whistling down the sky, earthshaking thump of a recklessly fast landing, feet that hurried over blistering rock and hands that hammered on the door, scarcely reached through the charred darkness of Flandry's mind. But when the door crashed open and the wind blasted in, he swam up through waves of pain. And the thin face of Chives waited to meet him.

"Here, sir. Sit up. If I may take the liberty—"

"You green bastard," croaked Flandry out of nightmare, "I ordered you to —"

"Yes, sir. I delivered your tape. But after that, it seemed advisable to slip back and stay in touch with Mr. Bryce. Easy there, sir, if you please. We can run the blockade with little trouble. Really, sir, did you think *natives* could bar your own personal spacecraft? I shall prepare medication for the young lady, and tea is waiting in your stateroom."

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Fleet Admiral Sir Thomas Walton was a big man, with gray hair and bleak faded eyes. He seldom wore any of his decorations, and visited Terra only on business. No sculp, but genes and war and unshed tears, when he watched his men die and then watched the Imperium dribble away what they had gained, had carved his face. Kit thought him the handsomest man she had ever met. But in her presence, his tongue locked with the shyness of an old bachelor. He called her Miss Kittredge, assigned her a private cabin in his flagship, and found excuses to avoid the officers' mess where she ate.

She was given no work, save keeping out of the way. Lonely young lieutenants buzzed about her, doing their best to charm and amuse. But Flandry was seldom aboard the dreadnaught.

The fleet orbited in darkness, among keen sardonic stars. Little could actively be done. Ogre must be watched, where the giant planet crouched an enigma. The Ardazirho force did not seek battle, but stayed close to Vixen where ground support was available and where captured robofactories daily swelled its strength. Now and then the Terrans made forays. But Walton hung back from a decisive test. He could still win—*if* he used his whole strength and if Ogre stayed neutral. But Vixen, the prize, would be a tomb.

Restless and unhappy, Walton's men muttered in their ships.

After three weeks, Captain Flandry was summoned to the admiral. He whistled relief. "Our scout must have reported back," he said to his assistant. "Now maybe they'll take me off this damned garbage detail."

The trouble was, he alone had been able to speak Urdahu. There were a few hundred Ardazirho prisoners, taken off disabled craft by boarding parties. But the officers had destroyed all navigational clues and died, with the ghastly gallantry of preconditioning. None of the enlisted survivors knew Anglic, or cooperated with the Terran linguists. Flandry had passed on his command of their prime tongue, electronically; but not wishing to risk his sanity again, he had done it at the standard easy pace. The rest of each day had been spent interrogating—a certain percentage of prisoners were vulnerable to it in their own language. Now, two other humans possessed Urdahu: enough of a seed-bed. But until the first spies sent to Ardazir itself got back, Flandry had been left on the grilling job. Sensible, but exhausting and deadly dull.

He hopped eagerly into a grav scooter and rode from the Intelligence ship to the dreadnaught. It was Nova class; its hull curved over him, monstrous as a mountain, guns raking the Milky Way. Otherwise he saw only stars, the distant sun Cerulia, the black nebula. Hard to believe that hundreds of ships, with the unchained atom in their magazines, prowled for a million kilometers around.

He entered the No. 7 lock and strode quickly toward the flag office. A scarlet cloak billowed behind him; his tunic was peacock blue, his trousers like snow, tucked into half-boots of authentic Cordovan leather. The angle of his cap was an outrage to all official dignity. He felt like a boy released from school.

“Dominic!”

Flandry stopped. “Kit!” he whooped.

She ran down the corridor to meet him, a small lonely figure in brief Terran dress. Her hair was still a gold helmet, but he noted she was thinner. He put hands on her shoulders and held her at arm’s length. “The better to see you with,” he laughed. And then, soberly: “Tough?”

“Lonesome,” she said. “Empty. Nothin’ to do but worry.” She pulled away from him. “No, darn it, I hate people who feel sorry for themselves. I’m all right, Dominic.” She looked down at the deck and knuckled one eye.

“Come on!” he said.

“Hm? Dominic, where are you goin’? I can’t—I mean—”

Flandry slapped her in the most suitable place and hustled her along the hall. “You’re going to sit in on this! It’ll give you something to hope for. March!”

The guard outside Walton’s door was shocked. “Sir, my orders were to admit only you.”

"One side, junior." Flandry picked up the marine by the gun belt and set him down a meter away. "The young lady is my portable expert on hypersquidgeronics. Also, she's pretty." He closed the door in the man's face.

Admiral Walton started behind his desk. "What's this, Captain?"

"I thought she could pour beer for us," burbled Flandry.

"I don't—" began Kit helplessly. "I didn't mean to—"

"Sit down." Flandry pushed her into a corner chair. "After all, sir, we might need first-hand information about Vixen." His eyes clashed with Walton's. "I think she's earned a ringside seat," he added.

The admiral sat unmoving a moment. Then his mouth crinkled. "You're incorrigible," he said. "And spare me that stock answer, 'No, I'm Flandry.' Very well, Miss Kittredge. You understand this is under top security. Captain Flandry, you know Commander Sugimoto."

Flandry shook hands with the other Terran, who had been in charge of the first sneak expedition to Ardazir. They sat down. Flandry started a cigarette. "D'you find the place all right?" he asked.

"No trouble," said Sugimoto. "Once you'd given me the correlation between their astronomical tables and ours, and explained the number system, it was elementary. Their star's not in our own catalogues, because it's on the other side of that dark nebula and there's never been any exploration that way. So you've saved us maybe a year of search. Incidentally, when the war's over the scientists will be interested in the nebula. Seen from the other side, it's faintly luminous: a proto-sun. No one ever suspected that Population One got *that* young right in Sol's own galactic neighborhood! Must be a freak, though."

Flandry stiffened. "What's the matter?" snapped Walton.

"Nothing, sir. Or maybe something. I don't know. Go on, Commander."

“No need to repeat in detail,” said Walton. “You’ll see the full report. Your overall picture of Ardazirho conditions, gained from your interrogations, is accurate. The sun is an A4 dwarf—actually no more than a dozen parsecs from here. The planet is terrestroid, biggish, rather dry, quite mountainous, three satellites. From all indications—you know the techniques, sneak landings, long-range telescopic spying, hidden cameras, random samples—the Urdahu hegemony is recent and none too stable.”

“One of our xenologists spotted what he swore was a typical rebellion,” said Sugimoto. “To me, his films are merely a lot of red hairy creatures in one kind of clothes, firing with gunpowder weapons at a modern-looking fortress where they wear different clothes. The sound track won’t mean a thing till your boys translate for us. But the xenologist says there are enough other signs to prove it’s the uprising of a backward tribe against more civilized conquerors.”

“A chance, then, to play them off against each other,” nodded Flandry. “Of course, before we can hope to do that, Intelligence must first gather a lot more information. Advertisement.”

“Have you anything to add, Captain?” asked Walton. “Anything you learned since your last progress report?”

“No, sir,” said Flandry. “It all hangs together pretty well. Except, naturally, the main question. The Urdahu couldn’t have invented all the modern paraphernalia that gave them control of Ardazir. Not that fast. They were still in the early nuclear age, two decades ago. Somebody supplied them, taught them, and sent them out a-conquering. Who?”

“Ymir,” said Walton flatly. “Our problem is, are the Ymirites working independently, or as allies of Merseia?”

“Or at all?” murmured Flandry.

"Hell and thunder! The Ardazirho ships and heavy equipment have Ymirite lines. The governor of Ogre ties up half our strength simply by refusing to speak. A Jovian colonist tried to murder you when you were on an official mission, didn't he?"

"The ships could be made that way on purpose, to mislead us," said Flandry. "You know the Ymirites are not a courteous race: even if they were, what difference would it make, since we can't investigate them in detail? As for my little brush with Horx—"

He stopped. "Commander," he said slowly, "I've learned there are Jovoid planets in the system of Ardazir. Is any of them colonized?"

"Not as far as I could tell," said Sugimoto. "Of course, with that hot sun… I mean, we wouldn't colonize Ardazir, so Ymir—"

"The sun doesn't make a lot of difference when atmosphere gets that thick," said Flandry. "My own quizzing led me to believe there are no Ymirite colonies anywhere in the region overrun by Ardazir. Don't you think, if they had interests there at all, they'd *live* there?"

"Not necessarily." Walton's fist struck the desk. "Everything's 'not necessarily,'" he growled, like a baited lion. "We're righting in a fog. If we made an all-out attack anywhere, we'd expose ourselves to possible Ymirite action. This fleet is stronger than the Ardazirho force around Vixen—but weaker than the entire fleet of the whole Ardazirho realm—yet if we pulled in reinforcements from Syrax, Merseia would gobble up the Cluster! But we can't hang around here forever, either, waiting for somebody's next move!"

He stared at his big knobbly hands. "We'll send more spies to Ardazir," he rumbled. "Of course some'll get caught, and then Ardazir will know we know, and they'll really exert themselves against us…By God, maybe the one thing to do is smash them here at Vixen, immediately, and then go straight to Ardazir and hope enough of our ships survive long enough to sterilize the whole hell-planet!"

Kit leaped to her feet. "No!" she screamed.

Flandry forced her down again. Walton looked at her with eyes full of anguish. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I know it would be the end of Vixen. I don't want to be a butcher at Ardazir either...all their little cubs, who never heard about war—But what can I do?"

"Wait," said Flandry. "I have a hunch."

Silence fell, layer by layer, until the cabin grew thick with it. Finally Walton asked, most softly: "What is it, Captain?"

Flandry stared past them all. "Maybe nothing," he said. "Maybe much. An expression some of the Ardazirho use: the Sky Cave. It's some kind of black hole. Certain of their religions make it the entrance to hell. Could it be—I remember my friend Svantozik too. I surprised him, and he let out an oath which was not stock. *Great unborn planets.* Svantozik ranks high. He knows more than any other Ardazirho we've met. It's little enough to go on, but... can you spare me a flotilla, Admiral?"

"Probably not," said Walton. "And it couldn't sneak off. One ship at a time, yes, we can get that out secretly. But several...The enemy would detect their wake, notice which way they were headed, and wonder. Or wouldn't that matter in this case?"

"I'm afraid it would." Flandry paused. "Well, sir, can you lend me a few men? I'll take my own flitter. If I'm not back soon, do whatever seems best."

He didn't want to go. It seemed all too likely that the myth was right and the Sky Cave led to hell. But Walton sat watching him, Walton who was one of the last brave and wholly honorable men in all Terra's Empire. And Kit watched him too.

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He would have departed at once, but a stroke of luck—*about time,* he thought ungratefully—made him decide to wait another couple of days. He spent them on the *Hooligan,* not telling Kit he was still with the fleet. If she knew he had leisure, he would never catch up on some badly needed sleep.

The fact was that the Ardazirho remained unaware that any human knew their language, except a few prisoners and the late Dominic Flandry. So they were sending all messages in clear. By now Walton had agents on Vixen, working with the underground, equipped to communicate undetected with his fleet. Enemy transmissions were being monitored with growing thoroughness. Flandry remembered that Svantozik had been about to leave, and requested a special lookout for any information on this subject. A scanner was adjusted to spot that name on a recording tape. It did so; the contents of the tape were immediately relayed into space; and Flandry listened with sharp interest to a playback.

It was a normal enough order, relating to certain preparations. Mind-hunter Svantozik of the Janneer Ya was departing for home as per command. He would not risk being spotted and traced back to Ardazir by some Terran, so would employ only a small ultra-fast flitter. (Flandry admired his nerve. Most humans would have taken at least a Meteor class boat.) The hour and date of his departure were given, in Urdahu terms.

"Rally 'round," said Flandry. The *Hooligan* glided into action.

He did not come near Vixen. That was the risky business of the liaison craft. He could predict the exact manner of Svantozik's takeoff: there was only one logical way. The flitter would be in the middle of a squadron, which would roar spaceward on a foray. At the right time, Svantozik would give his own little boat a powerful jolt of primary drive; then, orbiting with cold engines away from the others, let distance accumulate. When he felt sure no Terran had spied him, he would go cautiously on gravs until well clear—then switch over into secondary and exceed the velocity of light. So small a craft, so far away from Walton's bases, would not be detected: especially with enemy attention diverted by the raiding squadron.

Unless, to be sure, the enemy had planted himself out in that region, with foreknowledge of Svantozik's goal and sensitive pulse-detectors running wide open.

When the alarm buzzed and the needles began to waver, Flandry allowed himself a yell. "That's our boy!" His finger stabbed a button. The *Hooligan* went into secondary with a wail of abused converters. When the viewscreens had steadied, Cerulia was visibly dimming to stern. Ahead, outlined in diamond constellations, the nebula roiled ragged black. Flandry stared at his instruments. "He's not as big as we are," he said, "but traveling like goosed lightning. Think we can overhaul short of Ardazir?"

"Yes, sir," said Chives. "In this immediate volume of space, which is dustier than average, and at these pseudo-speeds, friction becomes significant. We are more aerodynamic than he. I estimate twenty hours. Now, if I may be excused, I shall prepare supper."

"Uh-uh," said Flandry emphatically. "Even if he isn't aware of us yet, he may try evasive tactics on general principles. An autopilot has a randomizing predictor for such cases, but no poetry."

“Sir?” Chives raised the eyebrows he didn’t have.

“No feel…intuition…whatever you want to call it. Svantozik is an artist of Intelligence. He may also be an artist at the pilot panel. So are you, little chum. You and I will stand watch and watch here. I’ve assigned a hairy great CPO to cook.”

“Sir!” bleated Chives.

Flandry winced. “I know. Navy cuisine. The sacrifices we unsung heroes make for Terra’s cause—”

He wandered aft to get acquainted with his crew. Walton had personally chosen a dozen for this mission: eight humans; a Scothanian, nearly human-looking but for the horns in his yellow hair; a pair of big four-armed gray-furred shaggy-muzzled Gorzuni; a purple-and-blue giant from Donarr, vaguely like a gorilla torso centauroid on a rhinoceros body. All had Terran citizenship, all were career personnel, all had fought with every weapon from ax to operations analyzer. They were as good a crew as could be found anywhere in the known galaxy. And far down underneath, it saddened Flandry that not one of the humans, except himself, came from Terra.

The hours passed. He ate, napped, stood piloting tricks. Eventually he was close upon the Ardazirho boat, and ordered combat armor all around. He himself went into the turret with Chives.

His quarry was a squat, ugly shape, dark against the distant star-clouds. The viewscreen showed a slim blast cannon and a torpedo launcher heavier than most boats that size would carry. The missiles it sent must have power enough to penetrate the *Hooligan’s* potential screens, make contact, and vaporize the target in a single nuclear burst.

Flandry touched a firing stud. A tracer shell flashed out, drawing a line of fire through Svantozik's boat. Or, rather, through the space where shell and boat coexisted with differing frequencies. The conventional signal to halt, was not obeyed.

"Close in," said Flandry. "Can you phase us?"

"Yes, sir." Chives danced lean triple-jointed fingers over the board. The *Hooligan* plunged like a stooping osprey. She interpenetrated the enemy craft, so that Flandry looked for a moment straight through its turret. He recognized Svantozik at the controls, in person, and laughed his delight. The Ardazirho slammed on pseudo-deceleration. A less skillful pilot would have shot past him and been a million kilometers away before realizing what had happened. Flandry and Chives, acting as one, matched the maneuver. For a few minutes they followed every twist and dodge. Then, grimly, Svantozik continued in a straight line. The *Hooligan* edged sideways until she steered a parallel course, twenty meters off.

Chives started the phase adjuster. There was an instant's sickness while the secondary drive skipped through a thousand separate frequency patterns. Then its in-and-out-of-space-time matched the enemy's. A mass detector informed the robot, within microseconds, and the adjuster stopped. A tractor beam clamped fast to the other hull's sudden solidity. Svantozik tried a different phasing, but the *Hooligan* equaled him without skipping a beat.

"Shall we lay alongside, sir?" asked Chives.

"Better not," said Flandry. "They might choose to blow themselves up, and us with them. Boarding tube."

It coiled from the combat airlock to the other hull, fastened leech-like with magnetronic suckers, and clung. The Ardazirho energy cannon could not be brought to bear at this angle. A missile flashed from their launcher. It was disintegrated by a blast from the *Hooligan's* gun. The Donarrian, vast in his armor, guided a "worm" through the boarding tube to the opposite hull. The machine's energy snout began to gnaw through metal.

Flandry sensed, rather than saw, the faint ripple which marked a changeover into primary drive. He slammed down his own switch. Both craft reverted simultaneously to intrinsic sub-light velocity. The difference of fifty kilometers per second nearly ripped them across. But the tractor beam held, and so did the compensator fields. They tumbled onward, side by side.

"He's hooked!" shouted Flandry.

Still the prey might try a stunt. He must remain with Chives, parrying everything, while his crew had the pleasure of boarding. Flandry's muscles ached with the wish for personal combat. Over the intercom now, radio voices snapped: "The worm's pierced through, sir. Our party entering the breach. Four hostiles in battle armor opposing with mobile weapons—"

Hell broke loose. Energy beams flamed against indurated steel. Explosive bullets burst, sent men staggering, went in screaming fragments through bulkheads. The Terran crew plowed unmercifully into the barrage, before it could break down their armor. They closed hand to hand with the Ardazirho. It was not too uneven a match in numbers: six to four, for half Flandry's crew must man guns against possible missiles. The Ardazirho were physically a bit stronger than humans. That counted little, when fists beat on plate. But the huge Gorzuni, the barbarically shrill Scothanian with his wrecking bar of collapsed alloy, the Donarrian happily ramping and roaring and dealing buffets which stunned through all insulation—they ended the fight. The enemy navigator, preconditioned, died. The rest were extracted from their armor and tossed in the *Hooligan's* hold.

Flandry had not been sure Svantozik too was not channeled so capture would be lethal. But he had doubted it. The Urdahu were unlikely to be that prodigal of their very best officers, who if taken prisoner might still be exchanged or contrive to escape. Probably Svantozik had simply been given a bloc against remembering his home sun's coordinates, when a pilot book wasn't open before his face.

The Terran sighed. "Clear the saloon, Chives," he said wearily. "Have Svantozik brought to me, post a guard outside, and bring us some refreshments." As he passed one of the boarding gang, the man threw him a grin and an exuberant salute. "Damn heroes," he muttered.

He felt a little happier when Svantozik entered. The Ardazirho walked proudly, red head erect, kilt somehow made neat again. But there was an inward chill in the wolf eyes. When he saw who sat at the table, he grew rigid. The fur stood up over his whole lean body and a growl trembled in his throat.

"Just me," said the human. "Not back from the Sky Cave, either. Flop down." He waved at the bench opposite his own chair.

Slowly, muscle by muscle, Svantozik lowered himself. He said at last, "A proverb goes: 'The hornbuck may run swifter than you think.' I touch the nose to you, Captain Flandry."

"I'm pleased to see my men didn't hurt you. They had particular orders to get you alive. That was the whole idea."

"Did I do you so much harm in the Den?" asked Svantozik bitterly.

"On the contrary. You were a more considerate host than I would have been. Maybe I can repay that." Flandry took out a cigarette. "Forgive me. I have turned the ventilation up. But my brain runs on nicotine."

“I suppose—” Svantozik’s gaze went to the viewscreen and galactic night, “you know which of those stars is ours.”

“Yes.”

“It will be defended to the last ship. It will take more strength than you can spare from your borders to break us.”

“So you are aware of the Syrax situation.” Flandry trickled smoke through his nose. “Tell me, is my impression correct that you rank high in Ardazir’s space service and in the Urdahu *orbekh* itself?”

“Higher in the former than the latter,” said Svantozik dully. “The Packmasters and the old females will listen to me, but I have no authority with them.”

“Still—look out there again. To the Sky Cave. What do you see?”

They had come so far now that they glimpsed the thinner part of the nebula, which the interior luminosity could penetrate, from the side. The black cumulus shape towered ominously among the constellations; a dim red glow along one edge touched masses and filaments, as if a dying fire smoldered in some grotto full of spiderwebs. Not many degrees away from it, Ardazir’s sun flashed sword blue.

“The Sky Cave itself, of course,” said Svantozik wonderingly. “The Great Dark. The Gate of the Dead, as those who believe in religion call it…” His tone, meant to be sardonic, wavered.

“No light, then? It is black to you?” Flandry nodded slowly. “I expected that. Your race is red-blind. You see further into the violet than I do: but in your eyes, I am gray and you yourself are black. Those atrociously combined red squares in your kilt all look equally dark to you.” The Urdahu word he used for “red” actually designated the yellow-orange band; but Svantozik understood.

"Our astronomers have long known there is invisible radiation from the Sky Cave, radio and shorter wavelengths," he said. "What of it?"

"Only this," said Flandry, "that you are getting your orders from that nebula."

Svantozik did not move a muscle. But Flandry saw how the fur bristled again, involuntarily, and the ears lay flat.

The man rolled his cigarette between his fingers, staring at it. "You think the Dispersal of Ymir lies behind your own sudden expansion," he said. "They supposedly provided you with weapons, robot machinery, knowledge, whatever you needed, and launched you on your career of conquest. Their aim was to rid the galaxy of Terra's Empire, making you dominant instead among the oxygen breathers. You were given to understand that humans and Ymirites simply did not get along. The technical experts on Ardazir itself, who helped you get started, were they Ymirite?"

"A few," said Svantozik. "Chiefly, of course, they were oxygen breathers. That was far more convenient."

"You thought those were mere Ymirite clients, did you not?" pursued Flandry. "Think, though. How do you know any Ymirites actually were on Ardazir? They would have to stay inside a force-bubble ship all the time. Was *anything* inside that ship, ever, except a remote-control panel? With maybe a dummy Ymirite? It would not be hard to fool you that way. There is nothing mysterious about vessels of that type, they are not hard to build, it is only that races like ours normally have no use for such elaborate additional apparatus—negagrav fields offer as much protection against material particles, and nothing protects against a nuclear shell which has made contact.

"Or, even if a few Ymirites did visit Ardazir…how do you know they were in charge? How can you be sure that their oxygen-breathing 'vassals' were not the real masters?"

Svantozik laid back his lip and rasped through fangs: "You flop bravely in the net, Captain. But a mere hypothesis—"

"Of course I am hypothesizing." Flandry stubbed out his cigarette. His eyes clashed so hard with Svantozik's, flint gray striking steel gray, that it was as if sparks flew. "You have a scientific culture, so you know the simpler hypothesis is to be preferred. Well, I can explain the facts much more simply than by some cumbersome business of Ymir deciding to meddle in the affairs of dwarf planets useless to itself. Because Ymir and Terra have never had any serious trouble. We have no interest in each other! They know no terrestroid race could ever become a serious menace to them. They can hardly detect a difference between Terran and Merseian, either in outward appearance or in mentality. Why should they care who wins?"

"I do not try to imagine why," said Svantozik stubbornly. "My brain is not based on ammonium compounds. The fact is, however—"

"That a few individual Ymirites, here and there, have performed hostile acts," said Flandry. "I was the butt of one myself. Since it is not obvious why they would, except as agents of their government, we have assumed that that was the reason. Yet all the time another motive was staring us in the face. I knew it. It is the sort of thing I have caused myself, in this dirty profession of ours, time and again. I have simply lacked proof. I hope to get that proof soon.

"When you cannot bribe an individual—blackmail him!"

Svantozik jerked. He raised himself from elbows to hands, his nostrils quivered, and he said roughly: “How? Can you learn any sordid secrets in the private life of a hydrogen breather? I shall not believe you even know what that race would consider a crime.”

“I do not,” said Flandry. “Nor does it matter. There is one being who could find out. He can read any mind at close range, without preliminary study, whether the subject is naturally telepathic or not. I think he must be sensitive to some underlying basic life energy our science does not yet suspect. We invented a mind-screen on Terra, purely for his benefit. He was in the Solar System, on both Terra and Jupiter, for weeks. He could have probed the inmost thoughts of the Ymirite guide. If Horx himself was not vulnerable, someone close to Horx may have been. Aycharaych, the telepath, is an oxygen breather. It gives me the cold shudders to imagine what it must feel like, receiving Ymirite thoughts in a protoplasmic brain. But he did it. How many other places has he been, for how many years? How strong a grip does he have on the masters of Urdahu?”

Svantozik lay wholly still. The stars flamed at his back, in all their icy millions.

“I say,” finished Flandry, “that your people have been mere tools of Merseia. This was engineered over a fifteen-year period. Or even longer, perhaps. I do not know how old Aycharaych is. You were unleashed against Terra at a precisely chosen moment—when you confronted us with the choice of losing the vital Syrax Cluster or being robbed and ruined in our own sphere. You, personally, as a sensible hunter, would cooperate with Ymir, which you understood would never directly threaten Ardazir, and which would presumably remain allied with your people after the war, thus protecting you forever. But dare you cooperate with Merseia? It must be plain to you that the Merseians are as much your rivals as Terra could ever be. Once Terra is broken, Merseia will make short work of your jerry-built empire. I say to you, Svantozik, that you have been the dupe of your overlords, and that they have been the helpless, traitorous tools of Aycharaych. I think they steal off into space to get their orders from a Merseian gang—which I think I shall go and hunt!"

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As the two flitters approached the nebula, Flandry heard the imprisoned Ardazirho howl. Even Svantozik, who had been here before and claimed hard agnosticism, raised his ruff and licked dry lips. To red-blind eyes, it must indeed be horrible, watching that enormous darkness grow until it had gulped all the stars and only instruments revealed anything of the absolute night outside. And ancient myths will not die: within every Urdahu subconscious, this was still the Gate of the Dead. Surely that was one reason the Merseians had chosen it for the lair from which they controlled the destiny of Ardazir. Demoralizing awe would make the Packmasters still more their abject puppets.

And then, on a practical level, those who were summoned—to report progress and receive their next instructions—were blind. What they did not see, they could not let slip, to someone who might start wondering about discrepancies.

Flandry himself saw sinister grandeur: great banks and clouds of blackness, looming in utter silence on every side of him, gulfs and canyons and steeps, picked out by the central red glow. He knew, objectively, that the nebula was near-vacuum even in its densest portions: only size and distance created that picture of caverns beyond caverns. But his eyes told him that he sailed into Shadow Land, under walls and roofs huger than planetary systems, and his own tininess shook him.

The haze thickened as the boats plunged inward. So too did the light, until at last Flandry stared into the clotted face of the infra-sun. It was a broad blurred disc, deep crimson, streaked with spots and bands of sable, hazing at the edges into impossibly delicate coronal arabesques. Here, in the heart of the nebula, dust and gas were condensing, a new star was taking shape.

As yet it shone simply by gravitational energy, heating as it contracted. Most of its titanic mass was still ghostly tenuous. But already its core density must be approaching quantum collapse, a central temperature of megadegrees. In a short time (a few million years more, when man was bones and not even the wind remembered him) atomic fires would kindle and a new radiance light this sky.

Svantozik looked at the instruments of his own flitter. “We orient ourselves by these three cosmic radio sources,” he said, pointing. His voice fell flat in a stretched quietness. “When we are near the…headquarters… we emit our call signal and a regular ground-control beam brings us in.”

“Good.” Flandry met the alien eyes, half frightened and half wrathful, with a steady compassionate look. “You know what you must do when you have landed.”

“Yes.” The lean grim head lifted. “I shall not betray anyone again. You have my oath, Captain. I would not have broken troth with the Packmasters either, save that I think you are right and they have sold Urdahu.”

Flandry nodded and clapped the Ardazirho’s shoulder. It trembled faintly beneath his hand. He felt Svantozik was sincere, though he left two armed humans aboard the prize, just to make certain the sincerity was permanent. Of course, Svantozik might sacrifice his own life to bay a warning—or he might have lied about there being only one installation in the whole nebula—but you had to take some risks.

Flandry crossed back to his own vessel. The boarding tube was retracted. The two boats ran parallel for a time.

Great unborn planets. It had been a slim clue, and Flandry would not have been surprised had it proved a false lead. But…it has been known for many centuries that when a rotating mass has condensed sufficiently, planets will begin to take shape around it.

By the dull radiance of the swollen sun, Flandry saw his goal. It was, as yet, little more than a dusty, gassy belt of stones, strung out along an eccentric orbit in knots of local concentration, like beads. Gradually, the forces of gravitation, magnetism, and spin were bringing it together; ice and primeval hydrocarbons, condensed in the bitter cold on solid particles, made them unite on colliding, rather than shatter or bounce. Very little of the embryo world was visible: only the largest nucleus, a rough asteroidal mass, dark, scarred, streaked here and there by ice, crazily spinning, the firefly dance of lesser meteors, from mountains to dust motes, which slowly rained upon it.

Flandry placed himself in the turret by Chives. “As near as I can tell,” he said, “this is going to be a terrestroid planet.”

“Shall we leave a note for its future inhabitants, sir?” asked the Shalmuan, dead-pan.

Flandry’s bark of laughter came from sheer tension. He added slowly, “It does make you wonder, though, what might have happened before Terra was born—”

Chives held up a hand. The red light pouring in turned his green skin a hideous color. "I think that is the Merseian beam, sir."

Flandry glanced at the instruments. "Check. Let's scoot."

He didn't want the enemy radar to show two craft. He let Svantozik's dwindle from sight while he sent the *Hooligan* leaping around the cluster. "We'd better come in about ten kilometers from the base, to be safely below their horizon," he said. "Do you have them located, Chives?"

"I think so, sir. The irregularity of the central asteroid confuses identification, but…Let me read the course, sir, while you bring us in."

Flandry took the controls. This would come as close to seat-of-the-pants piloting as was ever possible in space. Instruments and robots, faster and more precise than live flesh could ever hope to be, would still do most of the work; but in an unknown, shifting region like this, there must also be a brain, continuously making the basic decisions. *Shall we evade this rock swarm at the price of running that ice cloud?*

He activated the negagrav screens and swooped straight for his target. No local object would have enough speed to overcome that potential and strike the hull. But sheer impact on the yielding force field could knock a small vessel galley west, dangerously straining its metal.

Against looming nebular curtains, Flandry saw two pitted meteors come at him. They rolled and tumbled, like iron dice. He threw in a double vector, killing some forward velocity while he applied a "downward" acceleration. The *Hooligan* slid past. A jagged, turning cone, five kilometers long, lay ahead. Flandry whipped within meters of its surface. Something went by, so quickly his eyes registered nothing but an enigmatic fire-streak. Something else struck amidships. The impact rattled his teeth together. A brief storm of frozen gases, a comet, painted the viewscreens with red-tinged blizzard.

Then the main asteroid swelled before him. Chives called out figures. The *Hooligan* slipped over the whirling rough surface. “Here!” cried Chives. Flandry slammed to a halt. “Sir,” added the Shalmuan. Flandry eased down with great care. Silence fell. Blackness lowered beyond the hull. They had landed.

“Stand by,” said Flandry. Chives’ green face grew mutinous. “That’s an order,” he added, knowing how he hurt the other being, but without choice in the matter. “We may possibly need a fast get-away. Or a fast pursuit. Or, if everything goes wrong, someone to report back to Walton.”

“Yes, sir.” Chives could scarcely be heard. Flandry left him bowed over the control panel.

His crew, minus the two humans with Svantozik, were already in combat armor. A nuclear howitzer was mounted on the Donarrian’s centauroid back, a man astride to fire it. The pieces of a rocket launcher slanted across the two Gorzuni’s double shoulders. The Scothanian cried a war chant and swung his pet wrecking bar so the air whistled. The remaining five men formed a squad in one quick metallic clash.

Flandry put on his own suit and led the way out.

He stood in starless night. Only the wan glow from detector dials, and the puddle of light thrown in vacuum by a flashbeam, showed him that his eyes still saw. But as they adjusted, he could make out the very dimmest of cloudy red above him, and blood-drop sparks where satellite meteors caught sunlight. The gravity underfoot was so low that even in armor he was near weightlessness. Yet his inertia was the same. It felt like walking beneath some infinite ocean.

He checked the portable neutrino tracer. In this roil of nebular matter, all instruments were troubled, the dust spoke in every spectrum, a million-year birth cry. But there was clearly a small nuclear-energy plant ahead. And that could only belong to one place.

"Join hands," said Flandry. "We don't want to wander from each other. Radio silence, of course. Let's go."

They bounded over the invisible surface. It was irregular, often made slick by frozen gas. Once there was a shudder in the ground, and a roar traveling through their bootsoles. Some giant boulder had crashed.

Then the sun rose, vast and vague on the topplingly near horizon, and poured ember light across ice and iron. It climbed with visible speed. Flandry's gang released hands and fell into approach tactics: dodge from pit to crag, wait, watch, make another long flat leap. In their black armor, they were merely a set of moving shadows among many.

The Merseian dome came into view. It was a blue hemisphere, purple in this light, nestled into a broad shallow crater. On the heights around there squatted negafield generators, to maintain a veil of force against the stony rain. It had been briefly turned off to permit Svantozik's landing: the squat black flitter sat under a scarp, two kilometers from the dome. A small fast warcraft—pure Merseian, the final proof—berthed next to the shelter, for the use of the twenty or so beings whom it would accommodate. The ship's bow gun was aimed at the Ardazirho boat. Routine precaution, and there were no other defenses. What had the Merseians to fear?

Flandry crouched on the rim and tuned his radio. Svantozik's beam dispersed enough for him to listen to the conversation: "—no, my lords, this visit is on my own initiative. I encountered a situation on Vixen so urgent that I felt it should be made known to you at once, rather than delaying to stop at Ardazir—" Just gabble, bluffing into blindness, to gain time for Flandry's attack.

The man checked his crew. One by one, they made the swab-O sign. He led them forward. The force field did not touch ground; they slithered beneath it, down the crater wall, and wormed toward the dome. The rough, shadow-blotted rock gave ample cover.

Flandry's plan was simple. He would sneak up close to the place and put a low-powered shell through. Air would gush out, the Merseians would die, and he could investigate their papers at leisure. With an outnumbered band, and so much urgency, he could not afford to be chivalrous.

"—thus you see, my lords, it appeared to me the Terrans—"

"All hands to space armor! We are being attacked!"

The shout ripped at Flandry's earphones. It had been in the Merseian Prime language, but not a Merseian voice. Somehow, incredibly, his approach had been detected.

"The Ardazirho is on their side! Destroy him!"

Flandry hit the ground. An instant later, it rocked. Through all the armor, he felt a sickening belly blow. It seemed as if he saw the brief thermonuclear blaze through closed lids and a sheltering arm.

Without air for concussion, the shot only wiped out Svantozik's boat. Volatilized iron whirled up, condensed, and sleeted down again. The asteroid shuddered to quiescence. Flandry leaped up. There was a strange dry weeping in his throat. He knew, with a small guiltiness, that he mourned more for Svantozik of the Janneer Ya than he did for the two humans who had died.

"—attacking party is about sixteen degrees north of the sunrise point, 300 meters from the dome—"

The gun turret of the Merseian warship swiveled about.

The Donarrian was already a-gallop. The armored man on his back clung tight, readying his weapon. As the enemy gun found its aim, the nuclear howitzer spoke.

That was a lesser blast. But the sun was drowned in its noiseless blue-white hell-dazzle. Half the spaceship went up in a fiery cloud, a ball which changed from white to violet to rosy red, swelled away and was lost in the nebular sky. The stern tottered, a shaken stump down which molten steel crawled. Then, slowly, it fell. It struck the crater floor and rolled earthquaking to the cliffs, where it vibrated and was still.

Flandry opened his eyes again to cold wan light. “Get at them!” he bawled.

The Donarrian loped back. The Gorzuni were crouched, their rocket launcher assembled in seconds, its chemical missile aimed at the dome. “Shoot!” cried Flandry. It echoed in his helmet. The cosmic radio noise buzzed and mumbled beneath his command.

Flame and smoke exploded at the point of impact. A hole gaped in the dome, and air rushed out. Its moisture froze; a thin fog overlay the crater. Then it began to settle, but with slowness in this gravitational field, so that mists whirled around Flandry’s crew as they plunged to battle.

The Merseians came swarming forth. There were almost a score, Flandry saw, who had had time to throw on armor after being warned. They crouched big and black in metal, articulated tail-plates lashing their boots with rage. Behind faceless helmets, the heavy mouths must be drawn into snarls. Their hoarse calls boomed over the man’s earphones.

He raced forward. The blast from their sidearms sheeted over him. He felt heat glow through insulation, his nerves shrank from it. Then he was past the concerted barrage.

A dinosaurian shape met him. The Merseian held a blaster, focused to needle beam. Its flame gnawed at Flandry's cuirass. The man's own energy gun spat—straight at the other weapon. The Merseian roared and tried to shelter his gun with an armored hand. Flandry held his beam steady. The battle gauntlet began to glow. The Merseian dropped his blaster with a shriek of anguish. He made a low-gravity leap toward his opponent, whipped around, and slapped with his tail.

The blow smashed at Flandry. He went tumbling across the ground, fetched against the dome with a force that stunned him, and sagged there. The Merseian closed in. His mighty hands snatched after the Terran's weapon. Flandry made a judo break: yanking his wrist out between the Merseian's fingers and thumb. He kept his gun arm in motion, till he poked the barrel into the enemy's eye slit. He pulled the trigger. The Merseian staggered back. Flandry followed, close in, evading all frantic attempts to break free of him. A second, two seconds, three, four, then his beam had pierced the thick super-glass. The Merseian fell, gruesomely slow.

Flandry's breath was harsh in his throat. He glared through the drifting red streamers of fog, seeking to understand what went on. His men were outnumbered still, but that was being whittled down. The Donarrian hurled Merseians to earth, tossed them against rocks, kicked and stamped with enough force to kill them through their armor by sheer concussion. The Gorzuni stood side by side, a blaster aflame in each of their hands; no metal could long withstand that concentration of fire. The Scothanian bounced, inhumanly swift, his wrecking bar leaping in and out like a battle ax—strike, pry, hammer at vulnerable joints and connections, till something gave way and air bled out. And the humans were live machines, bleakly wielding blaster and slug gun, throwing grenades and knocking

Merseian weapons aside with karate blows. Two of them were down, dead; one slumped against the dome, and Flandry heard his pain over the radio. But there were more enemy casualties strewn over the crater. The Terrans were winning. In spite of all, they were winning.

But—

Flandry's eyes swept the scene. Someone, somehow, had suddenly realized that a band of skilled space fighters was stealing under excellent cover toward the dome. There was no way Flandry knew of to be certain of that, without instruments he had not seen planted around. Except—

Yes. He saw the tall gaunt figure mounting a cliff. Briefly it was etched against the bloody sun, then it slipped from view.

Aycharaych had been here after all.

No men could be spared from combat, even if they could break away. Flandry bounded off himself.

He topped the ringwall in three leaps. A black jumble of rocks fell away before him. He could not see any flitting shape, but in this weird shadowy land eyes were almost useless at a distance. He knew, though, which way Aycharaych was headed. There was only one escape from the nebula now, and the Chereionite had gotten what information he required from human minds.

Flandry began to travel. Leap—not high, or you will take forever to come down again—long, low bounds, with the dark metallic world streaming away beneath you and the firecoal sun slipping toward night again: silence, death, and aloneness. If you die here, your body will be crushed beneath falling continents, your atoms will be locked for eternity in the core of a planet.

A ray flared against his helmet. He dropped to the ground, before he had even thought. He lay in a small crater, blanketed with shadow, and stared into the featureless black wall of a giant meteor facing away from the sun. Somewhere on its slope—

Aycharaych's Anglic words came gentle, "You can move faster than I. You could reach your vessel before me and warn your subordinate. I can only get in by a ruse, of course. He will hear me speak on the radio in a disguised voice of things known only to him and yourself, and will not see me until I have been admitted. And that will be too late for him. But first I must complete your life, Captain Flandry."

The man crouched deeper into murk. He felt the near-absolute cold of the rock creep through armor and touch his skin. "You've tried often enough before," he said.

Aycharaych's chuckle was purest music. "Yes, I really thought I had said farewell to you, that night at the Crystal Moon. It seemed probable you would be sent to Jupiter—I have studied Admiral Fenross with care—and Horx had been instructed to kill the next Terran agent. My appearance at the feast was largely sentimental. You have been an ornament of my reality, and I could not deny myself a final conversation."

"My friend," grated Flandry, "you're about as sentimental as a block of solid helium. You wanted us to know about your presence. You foresaw it would alarm us enough to focus our attention on Syrax, where you hinted you would go next—what part of our attention that superb red-herring operation had not fastened on Ymir. You had our Intelligence men swarming around Jupiter and out in the Cluster, going frantic in search of your handiwork: leaving you free to manipulate Ardazir."

"My egotism will miss you," said Aycharaych coolly. "You alone, in this degraded age, can fully appreciate my efforts, or censure them intelligently when I fail. This time, the unanticipated thing was that you would survive on Jupiter. Your subsequent assignment to Vixen has, naturally, proven catastrophic for us. I hope now to remedy that disaster, but—" The philosopher awoke. Flandry could all but see Aycharaych's ruddy eyes filmed over with a vision of some infinitude humans had never grasped. "It is not certain. The totality of existence will always elude us: and in that mystery lies the very meaning. How I pity immortal God!"

Flandry jumped out of the crater.

Aycharaych's weapon spat. Flame splashed off the man's armor. Reflex—a mistake, for now Flandry knew where Aycharaych was, the Chereionite could not get away—comforting to realize, in this querning of worlds, that an enemy who saw twenty years ahead, and had controlled whole races like a hidden fate, could also make mistakes.

Flandry sprang up onto the meteor. He crashed against Aycharaych.

The blaster fired point-blank. Flandry's hand chopped down. Aycharaych's wrist did not snap across, the armor protected it. But the gun went spinning down into darkness. Flandry snatched for his own weapon. Aycharaych read the intention and closed in, wrestling. They staggered about on the meteor in each other's arms. The sinking sun poured its baleful light across them: and Aycharaych could see better by it than Flandry. In minutes, when night fell, the man would be altogether blind and the Chereionite could take victory.

Aycharaych thrust a leg behind the man's and pushed. Flandry toppled. His opponent retreated. But Flandry fell slowly enough that he managed to seize the other's waist. They rolled down the slope together. Aycharaych's breath whistled in the radio, a hawk sound. Even in the clumsy spacesuit, he seemed like water, nearly impossible to keep a grip on.

They struck bottom. Flandry got his legs around the Chereionite's. He wriggled himself onto the back and groped after flailing limbs. A forearm around the alien helmet—he couldn't strangle, but he could immobilize and—his hands clamped on a wrist. He jerked hard.

A trill went through his radio. The struggle ceased. He lay atop his prisoner, gasping for air. The sun sank, and blackness closed about them.

"I fear you broke my elbow joint there," said Aycharaych. "I must concede."

"I'm sorry," said Flandry, and he was nothing but honest. "I didn't mean to."

"In the end," sighed Aycharaych, and Flandry had never heard so deep a soul-weariness, "I am beaten not by a superior brain or a higher justice, but by the brute fact that you are from a larger planet than I and thus have stronger muscles. It will not be easy to fit this into a harmonious reality."

Flandry unholstered his blaster and began to weld their sleeves together. Broken arm or not, he was taking no chances.

Bad enough to have that great watching mind next to his for the time needed to reach the flitter.

Aycharaych's tone grew light again, almost amused: "I would like to refresh myself with your pleasure. So, since you will read the fact anyway in our papers, I shall tell you now that the overlords of Urdahu will arrive here for conference in five Terran days."

Flandry grew rigid. Glory blazed within him. A single shell-burst, and Ardazir was headless!

Gradually the stiffness and the splendor departed. He finished securing his captive. They helped each other up. “Come along,” said the human. “I’ve work to do.”

-18-

Cerulia did not lie anywhere near the route between Syrax and Sol. But Flandry went home that way. He didn’t quite know why. Certainly it was not with any large willingness.

He landed at Vixen’s main spaceport. “I imagine I’ll be back in a few hours, Chives,” he said. “Keep the pizza flying.” He went lithely down the gangway, passed quarantine in a whirl of gold and scarlet, and caught an airtaxi to Garth.

The town lay peaceful in its midsummer. Now, at apastron, with Vixen’s atmosphere to filter its radiation, the sun might almost have been Sol: smaller, brighter, but gentle in a blue sky where tall white clouds walked. Fields reached green to the Shaw; a river gleamed; the snowpeaks of the Ridge hovered dreamlike at world’s edge.

Flandry looked up the address he wanted in a public telebooth. He didn’t call ahead, but walked through bustling streets to the little house. Its peaked roof was gold above vine-covered walls.

Kit met him at the door. She stood unmoving a long time. Finally she breathed: “I’d begun to fear you were dead.”

“Came close, a time or two,” said Flandry awkwardly.

She took his arm. Her hand shook. “No,” she said, “y-y-you can’t be killed. You’re too much alive. Oh, come in, darlin’!” She closed the door behind him.

He followed her to the living room and sat down. Sunlight streamed past roses in a trellis window, casting blue shadows over the warm small neatness of furnishings. The girl moved about, dialing the public pneumo for drinks, chattering with frantic gaiety. His eyes found it pleasant to follow her.

“You could have written,” she said, smiling too much to show it wasn’t a reproach. “When the Ardazirho pulled out o’ Vixen, we went back to normal fast. The mailtubes were operatin’ again in a few hours.”

“I was busy,” he said.

“An’ you’re through now?” She gave him a whisky and sat down opposite him, resting her own glass on a bare sun-browned knee.

“I suppose so.” Flandry took out a cigarette. “Until the next trouble comes.”

“I don’t really understan’ what happened,” she said. “’Tis all been one big confusion.”

“Such developments usually are,” he said, glad of a chance to speak impersonally. “Since the Imperium played down all danger in the public mind, it could hardly announce a glorious victory in full detail. But things were simple enough. Once we’d clobbered the Ardazirho chiefs at the nebula, everything fell apart for their planet. The Vixen force withdrew to help defend the mother world, because revolt was breaking out all over their little empire. Walton followed. He didn’t seek a decisive battle, his fleet being less than the total of theirs, but he held them at bay while our psychological warfare teams took Ardazir apart. Another reason for avoiding open combat as much as possible was that we wanted that excellent navy of theirs. When they reconstituted themselves as a loose federation of coequal *orbekhs,* clans, tribes, and what have you, they were ready enough to accept Terran supremacy—the Pax would protect them against each other!"

"As easy as that." A scowl passed beneath Kit's fair hair. "After all they did to us, they haven't paid a millo. Not that reparations would bring back our dead, but—should they go scot free?"

"Oh, they ransomed themselves, all right." Flandry's tone grew somber. He looked through a shielding haze of smoke at roses which nodded in a mild summer wind. "They paid ten times over for all they did at Vixen: in blood and steel and agony, fighting as bravely as any people I've ever seen for a cause that was not theirs. We spent them like wastrels. Not one Ardazirho ship in a dozen came home. And yet the poor proud devils think it was a victory!"

"What? You mean—"

"Yes. We joined their navy to ours at Syrax. They were the spearhead of the offensive. It fell within the rules of the game, you see. Technically, Terra hadn't launched an all-out attack on the Merseian bases. Ardazir, a confederacy subordinate to us, had done so! But our fleet came right behind. The Merseians backed up. They negotiated. Syrax is ours now." Flandry shrugged. "Merseia can afford it. Terra won't use the Cluster as an invasion base. It'll only be a bastion. We aren't brave enough to do the sensible thing; we'll keep the peace, and to hell with our grandchildren." He smoked in short ferocious drags. "Prisoner exchange was a condition. All prisoners, and the Merseians meant *all.* In plain language, if they couldn't have Aycharaych back, they wouldn't withdraw. They got him."

She looked a wide-eyed question.

"Never mind," said Flandry scornfully. "That's a mere detail. I don't suppose my work went quite for nothing. I helped end the Ardazir war and the Syrax deadlock. I personally, all by myself, furnished Aycharaych as a bargaining counter. I shouldn't demand more, should I?" He dropped his face into one hand. "Oh, God, Kit, how tired I am!"

She rose, went over to sit on the arm of his chair, and laid a hand upon his head. "Can you stay here an' rest?" she asked softly.

He looked up. A bare instant he paused, uncertain himself. Then rue twisted his lips upward. "Sorry. I only stopped in to say goodbye."

"What?" she whispered, as if he had stabbed her. "But, Dominic—"

He shook his head. "No," he cut her off. "It won't do, lass. Anything less than everything would be too unfair to you. And I'm just not the forever-and-ever sort. That's the way of it."

He tossed off his drink and stood up. He would go now, even sooner than he had planned, cursing himself that he had been so heedless of them both as to return here. He tilted up her chin and smiled down into the hazel eyes. "What you've done, Kit," he said, "your children and their children will be proud to remember. But mostly…we had fun, didn't we?"

His lips brushed hers and tasted tears. He went out the door and walked down the street again, never looking back.

A vague, mocking part of him remembered that he had not yet settled his bet with Ivar del Bruno. And why should he? When he reached Terra, he would have another try. It would be something to do.

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—And to the New England Science Fiction Association (NESFA) Inc. for its support in bringing classic science fiction back in print. The NESFA Choice Books are proposed by a member of NESFA, and all of them remain in print. See the following pages for a list of our books with information on how to order them online.

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A Lit Fuse: The Provocative Life of Harlan Ellison
by Nat Segaloff
Special Edition—available for pre-order only

An unguarded, uncensored, unquiet tour of the life of Harlan Ellison.

In late 2011 Harlan Ellison—the multi-award-winning writer of speculative fiction and famously litigious personality—did two uncharacteristic things. First, he asked biographer Nat Segaloff if he'd be interested in writing his life story. Second, he gave Segaloff full control. The result is the long-anticipated *A Lit Fuse: The Provocative Life of Harlan Ellison,* an Exploration. The expansive biography, which is the first such project in which Ellison has permitted large portions of his varied works to appear, is published by NESFA Press.

Segaloff conducted exhaustive interviews with Ellison over the course of five years and also spoke with many of his friends and enemies in an effort to get inside the man and pin down the best-known "Harlan stories." Their wide-ranging discussions cover his bullied boyhood, his storied marriages, his fabled lawsuits, and his compulsive writing process with more depth and detail than has ever before appeared in print. But it also delves deeply into the man's deeply held principles, his fears, and the demons that have driven him all of his 82 (so far) years. Friends, colleagues, and admirers such as Neil Gaiman, Patton Oswalt, Peter David, Robert Sawyer, Michael Scott, Edward Asner, Leonard Nimoy, Ed Bryant, Alan Brennert, Robert Silverberg, and many other notables add their voices.

Along the way the reader is treated to definitive versions of the Connie Willis controversy, the infamous dead gopher story, the adventure of fandom, and the final word on *The Last Dangerous Visions.* What emerges is a rich portrait of a man who has spent his life doing battle with his times and himself, always challenging his readers to reach for a higher plane and goading himself to get them there. It's funny, wise, shocking, and—well, it's Harlan.

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Erin Underwood, editor

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Book Review

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